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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 22 September, 1954 Number 1

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TEXAS HERDS BRING DEATH ..... **Lauran Paine** 8
There was trouble in Lodgepole already, what with a shortage of water and feed. And now, the cattle-drives from Texas were starting, and Caleb Doorn knew that disquiet and discontent here would burst out into powdersmoke violence.

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One of the two would hang, unless neither confessed; then, they'd both hang!

Next Issue on Sale September 1st

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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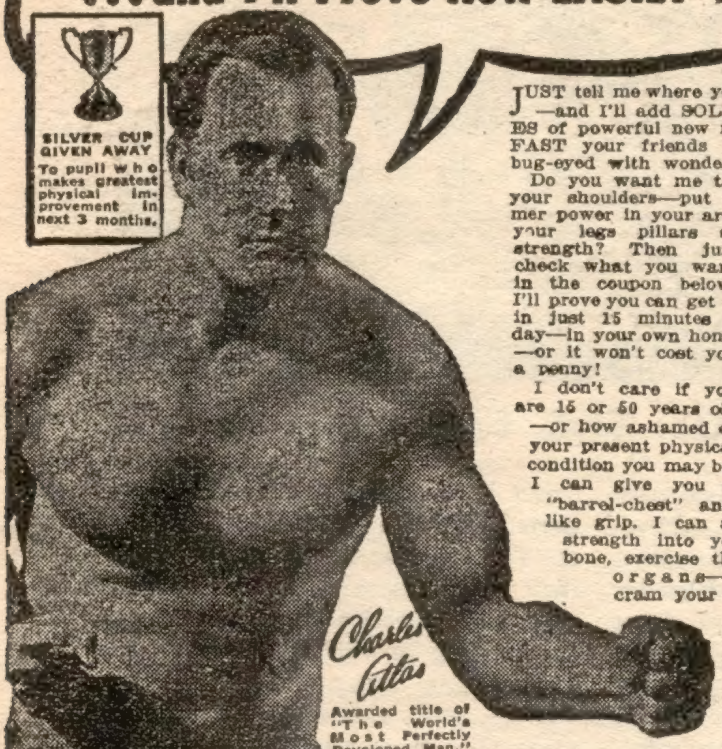

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KNOW YOUR INDIANS

True Fact Feature

By A. Hyatt Verrill

MORE TRIBES OF THE FAR SOUTHWEST

JUST AS A number of tribes were called "Apaches" by the whites, so their term "Yaquis" was applied to several tribes of the Mexican border and northern Mexico. These Indians were of Pima stock, the three principal tribes being the Cahitas, Mayos and Yaquis. All were sedentary Indians with permanent villages; they cultivated cotton, fruits, and food-plants but they differed greatly in their characters, temperament, and other respects.

Whereas the Mayos were peaceful people, who wished only to be left alone, the Cahitas and Yaquis were turbulent and warlike; they were bitter enemies of the Mayos until the latter were conquered and were forced to become allies in their raids into Mexico and their forays against the whites. Although not particularly hostile to the Americans, they were implacable foes of the Mexicans, with whom they carried on a more or less constant war for many years.

They were finally subdued by the Rurales under President Diaz, who ordered hundreds of the Indians transported to Yucatan and southern Mexico. The exile, however, proved to be to their advantage and benefit. Although at first they were virtually slaves, with the passing of the Diaz regime they became free men; and in the warm climate, with rich soil and abundant rains they prospered; many of their fellow tribesmen voluntarily migrated to central and southern Mexico. I have known a number of these Indians, all of whom have agreed that they are far better off than those of their tribes who remained in their former homes along the border.

Today, the Yaquis—as they are called—are scattered over most of Mexico, from Yucatan to the border. Those of the north are mainly employed as vaqueros; others are miners; while many have profitable farms of their own. They do some silver work and weave cotton cloth and attractive baskets that find a ready market—the Yaqui serapes, blankets and hammocks being regarded as the best in northern

[*Turn To Page* 81]

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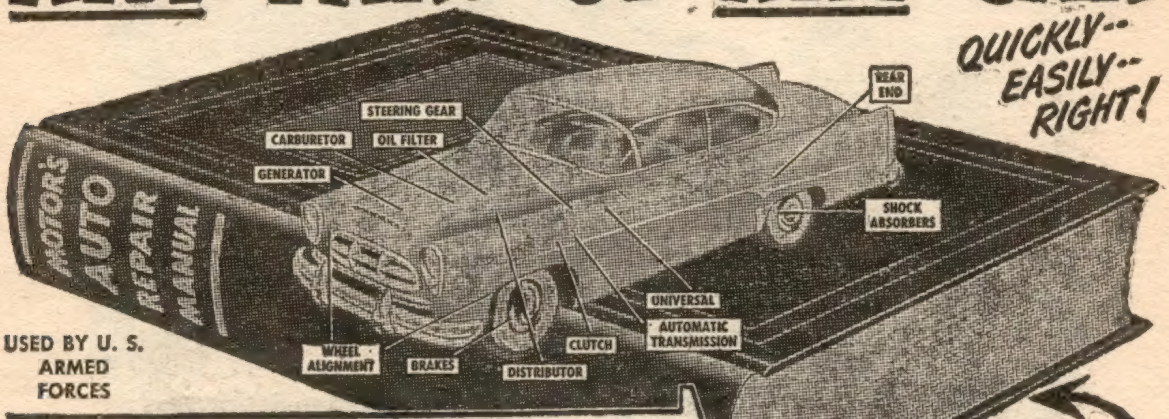

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Caleb Doorn Novel **by Lauran Paine**

TEXAS HERDS BRING DEATH

THERE WAS a sultriness to the hot desert air that made even the lizards slow and lethargic, and Caleb Doorn looked up at the sullen sky. His gaze wandered over the trackless Heaven and the brassy, blast furnace lining was covered over with a dull grey opaqueness. He looked down over the tremendous sweep of the ageless land and let his eyes stop on a distant dust cloud that wound its way down out of the far mountains. A Texas herd. His grey, deep-set eyes were thoughtful and pensive. Since the end of the war, great Texas herds had been coming up into the northern ter-

With the coming of the cattle-drives from Texas, Caleb Doorn expected trouble. There was hardly any water for the local ranchers, and even less feed; and when the bawling, thirsty cattle came into Lodgepole, he knew that war would break out on the spot. And just to top matters off, the Crow didn't want white men on their prairie . . .

ritories. Texas was making a gallant effort to recover her shattered economy under the Confederacy and the Texas cattle were the medium. The big black gelding saw the dust and pointed his small, delicate ears. Caleb reached forward and patted his damp neck. The heat was intense as he reined around off the slight eminence, and started to ride down the narrow deer trail that led toward the little frontier town of Lodgepole.

Caleb Doorn was an average-sized man dressed in the garb of a scout. His buckskin clothing was fringed, and the fringes swayed sinuously with the movement of his body as he rode into Lodgepole. The hostler at the livery

barn nodded respectfully. Caleb Doorn was a well known man on the changing frontier. His exploits among the Indians were almost legends. To the red men, he was known as the Silent Outcast, a former cavalrymen who spoke only when there was something worth saying.

After leaving his horse at the public barn, he strolled along Lodgepole's single, dust-coated road, past the raw, new buildings with their brave false fronts and entered the only two storied establishment in town, the Lincoln House Hotel. In the roughly furnished parlor, he saw the man he was looking for, Jack Britt, grizzled cowman whose ranches on the Verde made him one of the big men of the Lodgepole country.

"Texas herd comin', Jack. Crossin' the Big Sink right now comin' from the direction of Taos."

Britt's close-cropped, grey head nodded thoughtfully. "I figgered there'd be one along afore too long." He looked up at Caleb. "Well, it'll mean trouble. The Crows won't let 'em go on up country with their herd, an' the local ranchers will fight 'em if they try to hold their herd on Lodgepole range. Barely enough grass fer local cows, let alone havin' enough to spare for an outside herd." Caleb was turning away. "Where ya goin'?"

"Over to see Bull Bear. See if I can't talk him into lettin' the Texans go on through."

"He won't let 'em."

"Maybe not, but if he would, it'd save some trouble. Anyway, maybe the Texans'll cut out a few stragglers an' give 'em to the In'yuns for a tribute. That used to work pretty well."

Britt shook his head dourly. "Won't work no more, Caleb. Them Crows rustle whatever they need nowadays." He shrugged resignedly. "Well, go to it. If anyone can talk sense into that Redskin, you can. I'll hang around town until you get back. Maybe the Texans'll bivouac out in the Sink before you get back, an' there won't be no trouble fer awhile."

CALEB PICKED up his black horse at the livery barn and headed out onto the great prairie that began abruptly at the north end of Lodgepole. He rode with the grace of a born horseman. The midday heat was stifling, but the dull color of the sky was a good omen, and Caleb appraised it critically. There had been no rain for two months and the feed was fast turning brown.

It took three hours of slow going to get to Bull Bear's rancheria. Wraith-like riders fell in behind him. He affected not to notice them following him in the shimmering distance. Crow scouts, he knew, had been posted strategically across the prairie to keep a close watch on Lodgepole. Caleb understood the Indian viewpoint easily enough. With no rain and the feed drying up, there was barely enough feed to keep the natural game from moving farther north. When the game left, the Indians would have to go, too. This, naturally, they didn't want to do; consequently, they had drawn an imaginary deadline beyond which none of the white man's cattle could go.

Caleb rode past two sullen sentries, signalled that he came in peace, and was allowed to pass. The rancheria of Bull Bear was in a magnificent meadow fringed with a sprinkling of majestic pines that lent a delicate aroma to the grass lands where the conical, gaudily decorated teepees were scattered. Bull Bear's camp was in the hereditary upland of his people. From its slight eminence, the Indians could see the prairie around them for hundreds of miles. They could see the great dust clouds caused by the humpbacks; hours, sometimes days, before the buffalo would be close enough to kill. It was a favorite rancheria of the Crows and in the rank, coarse grass at their feet and the top two layers of mulch could be found the discarded artifacts of their ancestors, indicating how ancient was the camp site.

Bull Bear's teepee was somewhat larger than the others, being, in fact, a combination home and council lodge.

Impressive symbols of the Crow race and Bull Bear's fighting and hunting prowess were daubed with neolithic candor over the high structure. Four horses were tied to a crude hitchrail in front of the teepee and a heraldric coup stick was planted firmly in the ground in front, and a little to one side, of the teepee opening. Caleb dismounted under the curious glances of the Indians, who knew him by sight, and entered the great plains home of the Crow chieftain.

Inside, a caressing coolness swept over Caleb. He stood respectfully just inside the flap, accustoming his eyes to the shadowy gloom. A resonant voice boomed out at him in English. "Silent Outcast, I have been expecting you. Sit."

Caleb, who had a genuine affection for the scarred, dusky man before him whose piercingly fierce eyes were also genial and friendly, sat. Another man was sitting beside Bull Bear. He was younger, with twin streaks of red paint daubed horizontally across each cheek, stretching from his nose to the area just below each ear. He nodded with slight reserve and Caleb nodded back. "Bull Bear, I am always glad to find my welcome in the teepee of my brother. Why were you expecting me?"

Bull Bear snorted. "Because my scouts told me early this morning that a Texas herd was riding into the Big Sink."

Caleb was mildly surprised. If the Crows knew the herd was coming, they must have scouts complete around Lodgepole and far out on the plains south of town. "Why would I come to you because of a Texas herd?"

Bull Bear's face was touched by a faint smile. "Because you would want to get my permission to let the Texans cross Crow land. It is simple, Silent Outcast. Unless the Texans cross Crow land, there will be a fight with the Lodgepole cow men. You would try to avert this."

Caleb looked for a long silent moment at the Indian. He had encountered Indian perspicacity before, but never, that he could recall, had he run onto an Indian who thought through to the end of a situation. Curious to see how far Bull Bear's reasoning had gone, he spoke again. "You are a wise man. What, then, is in the end?"

Bull Bear leaned forward a little. "There will be a fight among the white cow men. Some will be killed. Some will give up and go back beyond the mountains. Others will hunt new ranges and new ways of driving their cows into the north country." He straightened up and smiled slightly. "The white men who will stay in the land, are my brothers."

Caleb nodded solemnly. "This will happen unless you allow the Texans to cross Crow land."

"They cannot cross!"

"Many men will die—"

"White men, not red men."

"I see. You want the white men to fight among themselves. Even this small war might take some of the growing pressure of the whites off the Crows."

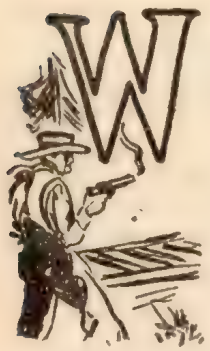
"Yes, Silent Outcast. The Indian has little left, but what he has, he must plan to keep." The powerful shoulders rose and fell eloquently and Caleb grudgingly admitted that, in reversed places, he too, would act the same way. "Without our hunting lands and our hereditary homes, we are a lost people."

Doorn nodded sadly. "This is so." He arose slowly and the two Indians looked at him in impassive silence. "I am sorry."

As he turned to leave, Bull Bear spoke softly. "Silent Outcast, you are the Indian's brother. You, alone of your race, understand their side. May your God protect you in trouble ahead." Caleb nodded in salute and left the teepee. As the gentle sound of his horse's shod hoofs sent back a retreating dull echo, Bull Bear turned to the younger man at his side. "In these troubled times, the Crows must stay out of trouble. When the whiteskins fight, they are like blind snakes. They strike out at anything. See that the

fighting clans are told of this." He looked broodingly out the teepee flap where Caleb had so recently left. "Remember Silent Outcast well, Running Horse. He is the true friend of the Indian and a great fighting man. His coups are many and his gun never misses. He is your white brother."

2



WHEN CALEB rode back into Lodgepole, dusk was falling. There was a small knot of loafers hanging around the livery barn when he put up his horse. When he walked past them on his way to the Lincoln House, he heard a snatch of conversation: "Well, they can't stop here, the boys are organizin' to run 'em off."

Caleb's face was bitter when he strode into the hotel. Jack Britt motioned him to a chair beside him, looked inquiringly into Caleb's face and read his answer. He shook his head gravely. "You don't have to tell me. I can see it on your face."

"I don't blame the Indians, in a way."

Britt's blunt jaw locked irritably. "To hell with 'em. It wouldn't hurt nothin' if them cattle went through their lousy huntin' ground." He shrugged, "But if they say no, then that's it, I reckon."

Doorn could sense the tension in the air. "Anythin' interestin' happen while I was up at the In'yun camp?"

Britt swore irritably in a low voice. "A little flurry o' excitement. Some o' the boys heard about the Texas herd an' come a-roarin' into town spittin' fire and damnation. I collered 'em an' told 'em to sit it out an' we'd see what happens next. 'No sense bustin' onto trouble when it's comin' anyway."

"That all?"

"Not quite. The Texas critters are bedded down on this side o' the Sink. 'Feller name o' Chandler, big rawboned, rawhide sort o' fellow, is their trail boss. He rode into town this at'ternoon an' the boys sent him to me. I told him the situation an' he sort o' laughed."

"What'd he say?"

" 'Bout what I figgered he'd say." Britt answered. "He didn't have enough men to fight the whole damned Crow nation, but that he had more'n enough men to see that his cows weren't run off the range by a bunch of local cowboys. An' if he couldn't go through the Crows until he had worked up a big bribe for 'em, he'd have to feed his critters off'n our feed. 'Said he was sorry as hell about it, but that's the way it was."

Caleb got up and stretched. It had been a long day for him. "I'm goin' to get some sleep. Tonight'll probably be about the best for sleepin' for the next few days."

Britt nodded wryly. "You're more'n likely right at that, Caleb. Well, I'm goin' back out to the ranch tonight, but I'll be back in Lodgepole by the time you've eaten breakfast. 'Don't want to miss nothin', y'know."

Caleb ate at Sally Tate's cafe. It was a very frugal place with hard puncheon benches along a low counter of new fir. Sally was the orphaned daughter of some emigrants that didn't make it. She was a honey blonde with level, violet blue eyes, a luscious full mouth and a figure that made all the Lodgepole cowboys sigh. Her nose wrinkled across the tiny saddle of freckles when she saw Caleb enter.

He smiled back. "Sally, you're the prettiest woman in this cafe, y'know it?"

Her laugh was disturbing in a throaty way. "An' you're the prettiest man. Chili beans?"

"I reckon."

Caleb ate slowly and Sally leaned over the counter. "Caleb, is there something wrong in Lodgepole?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Every cowboy who's been in here today acts like he's afraid to kid me."

Caleb's deep eyes squinted in amusement. "Well, I'd say that was the best sign in the world. There's a Texas herd camped on this side of the Sink."

"Oh." It sounded very small and the large violet were on him with an unusual gravity. "Are you mixed up in it?"

"Uh, well, not exactly. I'm not a cattleman. I'm an old friend of Jack Britt's though. He and I used to scout for the army together."

Sally's taffy hair waved when she nodded. "If Jack gets into it, you will too, because he's your compadre, is that it?"

"Well, sort of. Y'see—"

Sally straightened with an exasperated look on her face. "You men! You're like little children. This is no concern of yours, Caleb Doorn. Besides, if there's trouble, you might get hurt." Sally caught herself and blushed wildly.

Caleb looked up, a spoonful of chili beans poised in his hand. At that precise moment, the door slammed gently and Sally's flustered face raised and her eyes went quickly over the tall, recklessly smiling two-gun man who was drinking in her freshness with languid, bold eyes. The newcomer frowned a little and his small, dark eyes read Sally's embarrassment and his gaze dropped abruptly to Caleb's broad back. "This here squaw man bothering' you, ma'm?"

Caleb felt the sting of the insinuation. Many newcomers to the northern country thought every white man who wore fringed buckskin was a squaw man. Most, however, were very careful with the term. Graveyards all over the West were populated by men who had insulted others by calling them "squaw men". The stranger saw the horror in Sally's eyes and didn't wait for her answer. With two large steps, he was beside Caleb and a talon-like hand grabbed for the scout's shoulder. "In Texas, we don't tolerate no insultin' o' women, squaw man!"

Caleb was out from under the reaching fingers of steel, on his feet and facing the man. Texan was stamped all over him. He was obviously one of the drivers with the Texas herd. Caleb noted the two tied-down guns, too. Texas gun fighter. He shook his head slowly and his eyes were frosty. "This young lady happens to be a friend of mine, an', if I were you, Texan, I'd go easy on that 'squaw man' term, up here."

There was a sneer on the tall man's face. "Y'would, would ya? Well down in Texas—"

"You're not down in Texas now."

The man's face darkened. He looked contemptuously at the smaller man for a second, then one long, wiry fist shot out. Caleb rolled with it and the blow glanced off his shoulder. The Texan was making a very common and fatal error. He was over confidently under-estimating the man in front of him. Caleb had fought the best brawlers on the frontier, Indian and white, and he was respected by both. He moved forward on the balls of his feet with the speed of light, and a massively muscled arm shot out. The Texan looked surprised when it smashed into his stomach. He went over a little to take some of the shock out of the blow.

Sally Tate, ashen-faced and horrified, was rigid behind the counter as the tall Texan swore violently and lunged at Caleb. The scout, wasn't there when the stranger's ham-like fist, a blundgeon of bone and sinew, whipped into the hot atmosphere. Caleb stepped clear of the furiously charging gunman, ducked under the long arms and bore in. He shot a rock-like fist into the Texan's stomach that stopped the larger man. Before the gunman could recover, another bone and muscle piston crashed into his chest and the third, as the Texan was rocking back on his high boot heels, slammed into his jaw like the kick of a mule. There was a loud popping sound, sharp and clear in the charged atmosphere, and the Texan went down, half-in, half-out of the cafe, his head and shoulders lying through the half-opened door.

Caleb turned and looked at Sally. Her large eyes were glassy. "Sit down, Sally. Get a hold of yourself. I'm awfully sorry. It shouldn't have happened in here."

A rush of color came back into the girl's cheeks as she turned to Caleb. "Is he dead?" Caleb looked down at the stunned Texan and shook his head. Sally let a long, pent-up gust of air out of her lungs. "Caleb Doorn," the violet eyes were snapping angrily with released tension and relief. "You've hurt that man badly. You ought to be ashamed, Caleb. You had no right—"

CALEB WAS half-way up the plank sidewalk toward his room at the Lincoln House, before the voice finally died away behind him. He was amused at Sally's reaction and irritated at the overbearing arrogance of the Texan; and when his mind reviewed the happenings of the day, he felt foreboding over what the future held. If all the drovers with the Texas herd were of the same stripe, there would be no way to avoid trouble. The hotel was dark when Caleb went up to his room. The bed felt good, and until he sank down into it with a comfortable sigh, he had had no idea how tired he was.

When Caleb awoke, it was to find a pair of worried, squinted blue eyes, faded and anxious, bending over him. "Come on. Hell, ya can't sleep all day."

"No? Jack, you don't know me, once I'm in one of these man-made beds." He swung his feet out of the bed and reached for his boots and britches with a prodigious yawn. " 'You get run off the ranch this morning? Hell, it's twenty miles from your place on the Verde to Lodgepole. You must've gotten astride before sun-up."

Britt rolled a lumpy cigaret while he waited for Caleb to finish his toilet. His voice drowned out the splashing of the scout at the commode set on the marble-topped dresser. "Well, dammit all, I didn't allow I'd have to come to town till later, but some of the Box J boys come by last night, pretty late, an' tol' me that some firebrand laid

out the foreman of the Texans in Sally Tate's cafe." He popped the cigaret into his mouth had lit it with an angry gesture. Through a cloud of greyish smoke, his voice was edgy and harsh. "As if trouble ain't comin' fast enough, some damned fool has to beat hell out'n the ramrod of that trail herd, makin' trouble a certainty now. Oh Lord, sometimes I wished I'd never seen this burned out corner of hell."

Caleb cocked his head a little as he held up the worn towel to dry his face. "Ain't that rain, Jack?"

"Sure it's rain. 'Been rainin' off an' on all night. Well," the hard lines softened a little, "that's one blessing anyway. Now the grass'll come back."

Doorn rubbed himself musingly. "Jack, that Texas gunman came into Sally's lookin' for trouble. I'm the one that downed him."

Britt looked up incredulously. "You?"

"Yep. He didn't leave me any choice."

Britt groaned and took a deep draw on the quirley in his hand. "Well, I know you ain't a trouble maker, so he

more'n likely got just what he was after. But it sure clinches things."

"I'm sorry, Jack."

"Did you say he was a gunman?"

"I reckon. Anyway he had two tied-down guns an' that look about him, if you know what I mean."

Britt nodded curtly. "I know what you mean, all right. Well, let's go down an' get some breakfast."

Sally glared at Caleb when she set the thick plates of fried eggs and side-meat down in front of them. "Bad enough to knock him unconscious, but why did you have to leave him here for me to take care of?"

Caleb shrugged and smiled. "The way you were eatin' into me, I figured I'd be safer with a nest of mountain lions, so I left. Did he say much after he came around?"

Sally smiled lop-sidedly. "Well, nothing complimentary, I can assure you. He wanted to know who you were and I told him. Also, he said he'd be back today with his crew and they were going to take over Lodgepole, as well as all the grass land they needed to run their cattle on, until their boss figured out what they were going to do about the Crow refusal to let them go on north."

Jack Britt finished his breakfast, paid Sally and got up. "Sally, I wish you'd get married."

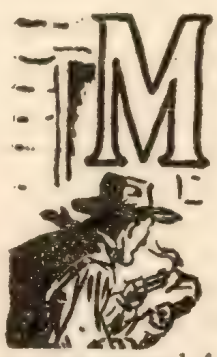
The girl was startled and looked up quickly. "Why, Jack?"

"Because you're the only one I've ever known who could make this hombre settle down." He wagged his head solemnly at the red-faced girl and ignored Doorn's embarrassed frown. "He'll never amount to a damn, Sally, till you take him in hand. The West is changin', girl. Scouts an' the like are a lost breed now. It's goin' to be a cowman's West, an' if you'll get him shook out'n those fringed suits, he'll make his pile along with the rest o' us."

Caleb was smiling dourly at his old friend. He nodded at Sally with a wink. "Sure must be somethin' in what he says, Sally. That's the longest speech I ever heard him make. Scouts turned cowmen sure get windy, don't they?"

Jack growled under his breath. "Come on, Caleb. Let's go see this here imported town marshal Lodgepole hired a few months back. They tell me he's a rip-snorter from down in New Mexico Territory."

3



MARSHAL HOLT was a hard-eyed, lean-jawed man of middle age, with a bear trap line for a mouth and an angular, spare body to match. Only his thinning grey hair gave a clue to his age, and that seldom was uncovered from beneath the low-crowned, flat-brimmed hat he wore tilted slightly forward, low over his slate grey eyes. "Yeah, Britt, I heard it was comin'." The bony shoulders rose and fell. "Well, let 'er come. I'll kill the first gunman who draws a gun in Lodgepole. That's my job."

Caleb studied the marshal and didn't particularly care for what he saw. Marshal Holt was a killer, through and through. Cold, unemotional and ruthless. Jack Britt frowned heavily. "Oh, I don't think we got'ta take any such quick action as that. Do—"

"Look, Britt. This here is my headache, not yours. I get paid to keep the peace and by gawd, I'll keep 'er. Any o' them Texans come into town huntin' trouble, I'll handle 'em."

Without a word, Caleb and Jack left Marshal Holt's office. On the plank sidewalk outside, Jack's smoky eyes were narrowed a little. He pulled his coat a little closer about him. The rain was starting again and its tiny fingers were cool on the back of his neck. "I'll be damned if I like what's comin', Caleb. That marshal's a gun hawk if I ever saw one. Oh, hell," he turned up the walk toward the *Longhorn Saloon.* "Let's go get a drink."

Caleb pulled the flat, stiff brim of

his low-crowned hat down over his eyes. The rain didn't bother him half as much as the brusque town marshal did. They walked among the huddled people on the sidewalk and edged into the saloon. A rancher was loudly praising the rain over a tin cup of lukewarm beer. He raised the cup with one hand, his luxurious mustache with the other, and drank with loud, gurgling sounds. There were about fifteen Lodgepole townsmen and cattlemen in the place. A sprinkling of younger cowboys, flushed and alert, were scattered through the crowd. In a far corner, a poker game was going full tilt, the players impassively smoking and ignoring the rest of the room.

"What'll it be, gents?"

"Couple o' beers, Sam."

The tin cups slid before Caleb and Jack and the bartender looked at them anxiously. "Trouble's brewin', boys."

Jack drank a little and nodded sourly. "You ain't tellin' us nothing, Sam."

"No? Well, there was three o' them Texans in here a while back, an' one of 'em was a big hombre with tied-down guns. They didn't stay long, just looked us over an' left."

Caleb was surprised that they were in town so early. He said nothing and drank his beer slowly, eyes on the back bar mirror. Jack Britt shrugged. "Most o' the cowmen been in, Sam?"

The bartender nodded wryly. "Hell, yes. I reckon every cowman fer a hundred miles been here once or twice this mornin'." He shook his head. "They're wanderin' aroun' town like lost dogs, lookin' to be in the right place at the right time, I reckon."

"You there, at the bar. Squaw man!"

The room got suddenly quiet enough to hear men breathing. Caleb had seen them come in while the bartender and Jack had been talking. He had seen the lanky foreman of the Texans single him out to the crowd of cold-eyed, bronzed-faced men behind him. Caleb set the beer cup down easily and answered without turning around. "If you mean me, Tejano, remember what I told you about callin' folks 'squaw man' up in this country."

The big man's hands were poised to swoop for his tied-down guns and his even, white teeth were visible through the flat lips. "Turn aroun', squaw man!"

Caleb didn't move. He calmly studied the hard faces behind the foreman. "How many men you got there, *gringo sallao?*"

The insult was worse than being called a squaw man, and the Texans all knew it. The foreman ripped out an obscene oath. "Enough to take care of any Lodgepole cowmen who want to buy into this game."

"Well, Texan, tell 'em to get out from behind you, 'cause none of these boys are doin' my fightin' for me an' I don't want to hit some man I don't have nothin' against."

The Texan crouched a little lower. His voice was soft and deep. "All right, squaw man, it's just between us, then. Turn around an' take yore medicine."

Out of all the witnesses to that fight, none could ever swear that they saw what happened. There was a blur of action, a swish of fringes, and the *Longhorn Saloon* was rocked by two deafening explosions that were magnified by the four walls and roof. There were no second shots. This was a gunfight between two thoroughly experienced gunmen. One shot each; that is all it took. For a long moment, there was a deathly silence, then the bartender spoke up in a rasping, small voice. "See if he's dead, boys."

NONE OF the local men went forward and two of the Texans, hesitatingly, looking uneasily at the Lodgepole cowmen and the cowboys, walked gingerly over and bent over their foreman's sprawled, still form. One of the riders looked up at Caleb, still standing against the bar, his voice small with awe. "Plumb through the head." There was a rash of movement at the batwing doors and Marshal Holt, savage eyes slitted in his hawk-

nosed face, hat brim low and menacing, stood just inside the opening. "Who done it?"

Caleb nodded. "I did."

"Witnesses?"

Holt's hard, flat voice broke the spell and the room buzzed as some men turned to the marshal while others turned to their neighbors and began talking in strained voices. Holt came over beside Doorn. "Must a been self-defense, from what ever'body says." He let his cold eyes travel the full length of the scout and back. "I knew that hombre, once. He was Powder Hudson, one of the killingest gunmen in the Southwest." Marshal Holt shook his head slightly. "'Don't see how ya done it. There's goin' to be trouble here, hombre, an' I don't want you in town when it hits. Git yore horse an' slope."

Caleb's thoughtful gaze was direct and calm. "You've made a mistake, Marshal. That man asked for what he got an' I'm not leavin' Lodgepole because I defended myself."

Holt's eyes blazed suddenly with a crazy light. "I say you are, hombre."

Jack Britt stepped up, red-faced. "Holt, you're the marshal here, not the governor. You don't order any respectable citizen out'n Lodgepole, now or any other time."

For a second, Holt's body tensed and his face went white. Caleb was watching for the little tell-tale tightening around the edges of the mouth. Several of the other Lodgepole men came forward. Three of them were prominent cowmen.

"Jack's right, Marshal. This here man's got as much right here in Lodgepole as you have. He stays."

Holt looked at the tight knot of angry cowboys and ranchers around him, estimated his chances at nil, and relaxed with a savage smile. "Can't argue with the whole damned town." He swung back to Doorn. "What I said still goes, hombre. You got till midnight tonight."

Doorn smiled softly. "That's all the time I'll need, Marshal."

Marshal Holt held the door open for two of the Texans who struggled through with the remains of Powder Hudson, ramrod of the Texas trail herd. Several of the Texans tossed hard looks at the Lodgepole cowmen as they went out. Jack Britt tossed off the rest of his beer with a big sigh. "Well, boys, unless I've got these Texans sized up all wrong, hell's goin' to pop loose any minute now."

The old white-headed man who argued with Holt over Doorn's leaving town, shrugged. "I wouldn't bet on it, Jack. Them coyotes are pretty much all air and now, with their foreman shot down, they just might take their damned critters an' head out around the Lodgepole country an' go on up north by way of *canyon del muerto.*"

Jack was looking thoughtfully at the older man when the bartender spoke up. "Here, you fellers, have a beer on the house. Gawd, that was the quickest gunfight I ever seen. Two shots an' it's over. Did'ja see where that Texan's shot went?"

Caleb shook his head dryly. "No. As long as it didn't go through me, I don't care."

"Right here. Look. Man, that was awful close." Caleb and the others looked down at the front of the bar. The dead man's slug had missed Ca-

leb's body by a fraction of an inch and had gone through the bar front and out through the back wall. "Close, damned awful close, I'd call it."

"Where ya goin', Caleb?" Britt's grizzled eyebrows were creased with a worried look.

"Down to the livery barn an' check on my horse. 'Back in a few minutes."

As Caleb emerged from the saloon, the people on the plank sidewalk looked at him oddly, and the buzz of excited voices trailed in his wake from the saloon all the way down to the livery barn. The half-breed hostler flashed a brilliant smile at him as he walked back and looked in at his drowsing black horse, sleek and shiny and comfortable, a big flake of fragrant timothy hay still untouched in the worn manger.

"Good fight. I heard about it."

Caleb was mildly irritated that the news had traveled so quickly. He nodded and ignored the quick look of anticipation. "Saddle my horse and hang the bridle on the saddle horn. Tie him in his stall. I may have to use him in a hurry. Understand?" The 'breed nodded importantly. He now had a secret that the other loungers would know nothing about. Caleb turned and walked out of the wide opening of the barn. Somewhere, a rifle cracked and Caleb heard the ripping tear of the heavy slug as it plowed its way into the wall beside him. He threw himself backwards, ran into the barn again, down the long, dirt-paved aisle between the stalls, past the startled hostler and out the back end. It was beginning to rain again and a freshet of cool, invigorating air blew into his face, fragrant with the smell of wet, mouldy earth and sage.

Caleb's fringed hunting shirt darkened as the rain fell on it. He stalked slowly, warily, around in back of the stores and avoided the rubbish and refuse piles, alive with shiny blue bottle flies, with effortless grace. The Texans were back for blood. He was opposite the *Longhorn Saloon* when the throbbing rumble of loping horses came to his ears. He stepped around in front of the building he had been using as a screen as a large host of heavily armed men swung up to the hitchrail and dismounted. Two tight-faced men were left to watch the horses and the rest of the riders surged into the saloon. Caleb stepped out into plain sight and both the Texans left with the horses saw him at the same time. One made a slight, bird-like jerk toward his gun and growled. The second man said something in a breathless voice and the first man stopped his dip. Caleb held them both with his cold stare and neither man moved. The speed of the scout's draw had made a deep impression on the Texan who had been present at the recent killing, and he had stopped the green cowboy just in time.

4

ALL OF Lodgepole, it seemed, had expected the Texans to return. There was only the gentle whisper of the light drizzle to break the awful silence in the town. Even as far away as Caleb was, he could hear the stentorian roar of a big, deep-chested man, in the saloon.

"Ah want the squaw man who done shot mah fo'man an', b'gawd, if'n y'all don't produce him right naow, I'll tear this heah li'l dung heap daown aroun' yuah ears."

There was the brittle silence again, then Caleb heard the scuffling boots and tinkling spurs as the Texans came through the batwing doors. They were beside their horses before the horse guard pointed at him and yelled in a high, hysterical voice, "Thar he stan's! Over thar ag'in that store. He's the feller as shot down Powder Hudson."

The Texans all went into action at the same time. It was a fair certainty that they were letting off pent-up steam, because at least a dozen of

them couldn't have seen the horse guard point to him. Caleb singled out a massive, flashily-dressed man with an explosive, blustering face. His gun was clear of its holster before the horse guard had stopped speaking. The big man swore thunderously and filled his hand. Caleb's shot sent the big pistol flashing backwards, out of his hand, then Caleb disappeared down the slim alley between the two buildings. The Texan roared in rage and pain and leaped on his horse. "Comb th' taown. Teah th' damned thang daown, but get me thet squaw man. Ah'll give a hunert dollars gold to th' cowboy that brings me that hombre daid or alive."

Marshal Holt had heard the firing and was just emerging from his office when a covey of the red-eyed cowboys swung past. One of them turned sideways in the saddle and fired a careless shot at the marshal. With one smooth motion, the marshal's gun was flaming. The rider went off over backwards and his frightened horse ran after the others, stirrups flapping and head high.

All hell broke loose. Lodgepole seemed to finally let go its pent-up emotion. Rifles cracked and pistols roared. The Texans, embattled and savage, shot indiscriminately at anything that moved. Two stray dogs and one saddle horse lay where they had been cut down in the deserted street, not far from the cowboy who had been shot off his horse by Marshal Holt. From the *Longhorn Saloon,* spiteful pistol fire erupted. The Lodgepole cowmen within sought targets with little chance of success. The fight had swirled almost out of range. With a sizzling oath, one of the younger Lodgepole riders darted through the batwing doors while the others watched. They all wanted to get outside, but feared the consequences of leaving as long as the Texans were loose on the town. The rider ran about fifty feet, when a ragged volley of rifle fire rattled up and down the road. He crumpled in a heap and the drizzling rain diluted the little pools of blood that formed around his dead body.

Britt wagged his head. "Not that way, boys. It's murder goin' out the front. See if they ain't a back way."

There was; the bartender showed it to them and singly and in pairs, the Lodgepole men got away from the besieged saloon. With the scattered defenders slipping through town, the fight became general. Marshal Holt was very effectively bottled up in his office, however, and his furious oaths rang over the intermittent gunfire. Storming and fuming, the fighting lawman challenged one and all of the malcontents to fight him. All he got in the way of replies was a bouquet of bullets that kept him indoors.

Caleb had scaled the back wall of the general store. He could hear the spurs of the running Texans below him. In the smattering of gunfire, he heard one Texan swear plainly and another laugh. Squirming along prone, Caleb risked a peek over the edge of the building. One Texan was exploring his rump, which had been grazed by a rifle slug. He had holstered his gun and was alternating between swearing with feeling, and groaning. The second cowboy was hunkered low behind a half-filled water barrel. Even as Caleb watched, the man levered his rifle and pumped a shot into the window of Sally Tate's cafe.

Caleb eased his .44 over the edge of the roof and spoke. "You there, pull up your britches an' help your pardner climb up here."

To say the Texans were startled would be putting it incorrectly. They were dumbfounded. Awkwardly, they clambered up to Caleb, who kept them covered. Once on the roof, he ordered them both to lie down, then disarmed and tied them with their own belts. Gags were made from their neckerchiefs and handkerchiefs, and the frontiersman smiled saturninely at them as he dropped off the roof.

Caleb was taking advantage of every foot of cover among the refuse piles and out buildings on his way to the livery stable. The rain was coming down now in a heavy drizzle that was

cold in contrast to the former heat. The gun butt was slippery in his hand. Up ahead, two men were backing around the end of a building, and the scout hastily ducked into an outhouse until he saw whether they were Lodgepole men or Texans. Unfortunately for Caleb, the outhouse turned out to be occupied by another hiding fighter. With an alarmed oath, the man fired his gun as Caleb spun away as far as the tight confines of the building would allow. The bullet scored a thin, hot scratch under Doorn's ribs. He felt it as he fired back and the tiny shack rocked on its hollowed out foundations. The door fell on its hinges as Caleb's body went against it and he fell outside in the slippery mud. The two men farther down turned white-faced at the eruption of the two shots. With an oath, one of them fired and missed. The words "squaw man" split the air and Doorn rolled as fast as he could in the mud, finally getting to one knee.

The Texans were the brace of horse guards he had seen in front of the saloon. The older one was firing with frantic haste and no attempt at accuracy. Caleb ran as he crouched, his gun spitting fire. The older man went down and the younger jumped and fled. A rifle crashed behind him and Caleb went down into the mud as he whirled. Standing spraddle-legged, a Winchester carbine held waist-high in both hands, the big, florid-looking Texan levered and fired again. Caleb threw two quick shots at the man, jumped to his feet and ran zig-zag for the dark interior of the livery barn. It was shadowy and dark inside, but the sour smell of powdersmoke rode the atmosphere like a warning.

JACK BRITT could hear Marshal Holt cursing in an embittered monologue and a little wry smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Nothing could be quite so annoying to one of the marshal's fire-eating propensities as to be bottled up inside his own office when a gunfight was going on in town. He hugged the wall of the Lincoln House closer as a rifle flamed off toward the livery stable. There were two muffled pistol shots from behind the barn and down a little ways, and Jack wondered who had gotten caught back there. He soon forgot, however, when a Lodgepole cowboy fell suddenly onto the overhang in front of the general store from the roof above. The body didn't roll and Jack's squinted eyes looked for the killer. A wisp of a black hat showed down the deserted street from him, on his side of the road. He cocked his pistol and waited. The black hat's curled edges came out a trifle, and Jack carefully brought his gun up. A rash of sudden firing in the neighborhood of the *Longhorn* drove the gunman back to cover again. Jack waited patiently until the hat came into view again. This time there was enough for a target. He fired methodically and the hat went sailing off into space like a frightened bird and its owner looked down the road at Jack for one startled second and disappeared. Jack moved, too.

Inside the livery stable, Caleb took a breather behind a jag of aromatic mountain hay. The cut along his ribs had bled profusely but the mud caking he had acquired while rolling around in the alley had pretty well staunched it. His fringed shirt was a wreck. Grimly he wiped his .44 off as best he could and reloaded it. Suddenly, he heard a board creak lightly, too lightly to be moved by any of the softly snorting, excited horses in the stalls. He tensed unconsciously and let his eyes roam familiarly through the eerie gloom of the building. Again he heard it and flattened out on his stomach, poking his head around one ragged corner of the hay stack. A big Texan was quietly stalking through the barn looking for him. Smiling bitterly, Caleb's pistol came up slowly, steadied, and fired with a thunderous explosion. The Texan's rifle went off unpredictably as Caleb's slug tore its stock into a gust of splinters. The big man staggered forward as the gun was wrenched out of his hands. He roared in pain and insane

fury and hurled himself toward the hay stack. Caleb cocked his gun again, but the big man, despite his bulk, was upon him before he could squeeze off the second shot, his ornate boot toe lashing out instinctively and sending Caleb's gun flying. The scout barely had time to get to his feet before the cowman was on him. A sizzling fist the size of a small ham roiled the air past Caleb's head and another gigantic hand slammed him backwards, striking him full in the chest. Caleb gasped and rolled away from the behemoth of ferocity that was boring in, roaring mad.

Caleb found an inner well of energy somewhere and came back on the balls of his feet. He recognized this fight as one for his life. The Texan was insanely angry and his tremendous body was capable of deadly force. He lashed out and the Texan took the blow without an effort to sidestep. Caleb had struck hard, but the Texan smothered the shocking force as though he hadn't felt it. A little awe surged through the frontiersman as he back-pedalled. The stranger charged, head down, roaring oaths, his big arms flailing like a thresher. Again Caleb gave way, but this time he went a little sideways and chopped two stunning blows under the Texan's ear that staggered the big man. Following up what he thought was an advantage, Caleb drove in with a rain of piston-like shots that caromed off the hard body of the other man like rubber balls.

A big fist lashed out in a looping, overhand shot and Caleb went down. The Texan stood over him, legs apart, breathing heavily for a second. Caleb shot one boot toe behind the big man's calf and darted the other foot out like the tongue of a snake, pushing it abruptly against the Texan's kneecap. With a look of surprise, the big man went over backwards hard. Before he could regain his feet, Caleb was up and poised. When the Texan came up off the floor, a one-two lashout of bony knuckled fists belted him like the explosions of a bull whip, in the face. He teetered for a long second and went down again, a bubbling, ragged sound of breathing coming out of his smashed nose.

Caleb felt weak as he scooped up his .44 and walked heavily toward the front of the barn. The firing was getting faster now and he edged carefully up to the yawning maw of the front entrance, risked a quick peek that drew no fire, drew in his breath and made an erratic, reckless rush for the opposite side of the road. Dust devils kicked up mud behind him as the Texas cowboys swung to gun him down, but he made it to the back of the apothecary's shop with only one boot heel missing and two holes through the back of his tattered hunting-shirt, that he knew nothing about. Leaning against the soggy wood of the building, he caught his breath as his narrowed eyes studied the immediate locality without seeing a single fighter. Knowing the Texans on his side of the road would be moving in on him, he reluctantly pushed himself off the wall and began a weary advance down past the *Longhorn Saloon* to Sally Tate's cafe.

5

ALMOST before his slippery pistol butt rapped on the thick back door of Sally's cafe, the door opened and Caleb shoved through. Sally's violet eyes were wide in alarm. "Caleb, you're hurt!" She went forward, but he backed away with a tired shake of his head and a tight smile.

"No, just scratched. Are you all right?"

Sally's tension relaxed as it had the night before when Caleb had left the now defunct Texan on her floor, unconscious. Sparks flashed from the deep blue eyes and her lips trembled. "Look at you! You're mud from the top of your head to your boot toes.

Don't stand there and drip that slime all over my clean floor; get over there by the stove." Caleb moved to obey and caught the flicker of a swift movement out of the corner of his eye. Instantly his muscles jerked into action as he whirled and his gun came out and up with incredible speed. Sally stood horrified, her mouth open and one hand at her chest.

"No shoot."

Caleb let the breath come out of him in a rasping sob. "That was close, Bull Bear. Damned close."

The Crow leader nodded wryly. "Too close. You hurt?"

"No; tired and filthy from wallowing in the mud out there," he nodded toward a rain flecked window where the slippery, dark earth was shiny with water. "But not hurt."

"You stop fight, then."

"Huh?"

"You stop fight. Crows let Texas cows go to the Platte if cowmen let Crow warriors guide them through Crow land by way of *canyon del muerto.*"

Caleb looked thoughtfully at the scarred warrior before he answered. *Canyon del muerto*—canyon of death—was aptly named. The trail was narrow above a deep canyon. Many emigrants had been ambushed there in the early days. Now, even with the Crows to guide them, the canyon trail would be a treacherous, slippery quagmire. Still, it was preferable to the fighting at that time still echoing through Lodgepole. Anything, Doorn thought to get rid of the Texans and their cattle. He nodded abruptly. "I'll see what I can do." He turned and opened the door a crack before Sally Tate caught his slippery, mud covered arm.

"Caleb, don't go. They'll kill you. Oh, Caleb—"

"Sally, I've got to try an' stop the killing. Bull Bear's offer to cross—"

"I don't care, Caleb. You're hurt. Stay here and let me bandage your side and wash the mud off you. Let someone else go."

Caleb fixed her with a critical look.

"Who?" She looked around her for a desperate moment, saw only the blank, disapproving look of the Crow chieftain and let her arm drop as Caleb slipped out of the cafe into the drizzle and mud.

The rain was coming down in a steady, persistent sheet of water now and Doorn was thoroughly drenched and streaked with the cloying mud before he managed to get to the *Longhorn.* A bullet came out of nowhere smashed into the rear door of the saloon, knocking it violently inwards. Caleb jumped frantically into the room, crouched and ready but saw no one. He swung over to the stairway leading upstairs and mounted them two at a time, a filthy, grim figure of a man, hair straggling over his grimy, hollow-eyed face, the wet .44 glistening in his muddy paw.

Caleb searched each room until he found what he was looking for, a small trap door in the ceiling leading up onto the roof. With surprising ability, he leaped up, caught on with his powerful fingers, and shoved the wooden cover away so that he could wiggle through. The rain hit him like a hundred cold little fists as he clambered out onto the roof. Straightening up, he was startled to see a crouched rifleman over beside the edge of the building's false front. Apparently, the drenching rain had muffled his noisy ascent. Stealing forward, he raised and cocked his sixgun. "Drop it, hombre, or I'll drop you."

The lean back tensed but the rifle fell into the pool of clear water at the man's feet. Caleb risked a quick glance down over the town. He could command the front of the livery barn easily from up there and it dawned on him where the gunman had been who had first shot at him as he emerged from the stable.

"Turn around, but don't raise up too

high or you'll get it from down below." The man turned. Doorn recognized him as one of the men who had been with the gunman foreman at the saloon. The man's eyes widened when he saw the filthy, ragged apparition before him. He recognized Caleb as the killer of his foreman and a dry tongue flickered over his rain washed face. "What's the name of that big hombre with the flashy clothes? The one who did all the hollerin' in the saloon this mornin'?"

"Jeff Chandler. He's th' owner o' the cattle. He's a big man down in—"

"Who was the other feller? The one I killed?"

"Powder Hudson. He was the foreman o' Chandler's trail drives."

"What's your name?"

"Buck Gleason."

"Got a good pair of lungs, Buck?"

"I reckon; why?"

"Go over to the edge of the false front, where you were, an' holler out for Chandler."

"Like hell," the answer came from a white and frightened face. "You won't make no Judas out'n me. I ain't callin' Jeff out so's you can gun him down."

"I'm not going to shoot him, Buck. I want to palaver about movin' the herd out o' here. The Crows just gave permission to cross their land. Now holler out!"

THE COWBOY stood undecidedly and Caleb's big gun came up persuasively. The Texan licked his lips again and turned away. He went to the edge of the false front, cupped his hand over his mouth, and yelled for Chandler. The gunfire dropped off as the fighters down below looked for the man behind the voice. Again Gleason yelled, and this time an answer came back. Gleason turned and looked hopefully at Caleb. "Now what?"

"Tell him to come out an' palaver."

It took a little yelling back and forth, but finally Chandler came hesitatingly out of the livery barn and the gunmen held their fire when Caleb yelled for them to hold off. Pushing Gleason up beside him, Caleb stepped into full view on the roof. He felt a glow of satisfaction at the swollen, purplish, blood-splattered appearance of the massive cowman.

"Chandler, the Crows have just agreed to let your herd go on up north, providin' you'll agree to let 'em guide you the way they want you to go."

Chandler's baleful eyes recognized the dripping figure on the roof as the "squaw man". His big fists opened and closed convulsively. For a long moment, he didn't reply. Then, he shrugged slightly. He'd like nothing better than to fight the Lodgepole men until they were all dead, then fire their miserable little town; but right now the cattle were the important thing. He shrugged again grimly and his sullen eyes were vicious above the wreckage of his face. He'd come back another time and wipe this Yankee scum off the face of the earth. "All right. Put up your guns an' help us move our cattle out an' we'll go."

Lodgepole came back to stilted life. The wounded were cared for in the *Longhorn Saloon* where benches were collected hastily and assembled into hard beds. The dead were duly identified and turned over to their respective allies for burial. Jeff Chandler, indignant more than pained, stood bitterly in the middle of the room talking to Jack Britt and Caleb, writhing inwardly under the stares of his cowboys and the Lodgepole men alike, his clothing splattered with the blood from his broken nose and purplish eyes.

"Bull Bear is down in the cafe. He says you can cross the Crow country if you'll go by way of *canyon del muerto,* thus staying off the hunting grounds of his people. He also said that he'd let you pass only if you'll let Crow warriors act as guides," Caleb said.

"Where is this In'yun?"

"I'll go get him." Caleb turned abruptly and left the cluttered, uncomfortable atmosphere of the *Longhorn,* where both factions were eyeing each other sullenly and tending to the injured.

Jack Britt frowned as he surveyed the big man's face. "Want some clean water an' salve fer your face?"

Chandler's brows contracted in a thunderous expression. "No, damn ya!" Britt shrugged and moved away, leaving the Texan alone in the noisy, tense room while he went among the Lodgepole men. When Caleb returned with Bull Bear, resplendent in a fiery red blanket and carrying a brand new Henry repeating rifle, Britt drifted back to the little group that had gathered around Chandler. The Texan glowered at the straight, square-jawed Indian. "Who d'ya think ya are, Redskin, tellin' Texans where they can cross—"

"None o' that!" Everyone turned and looked at the speaker. Marshal Holt, livid-faced and ramrod erect, was standing in the doorway. "You got your terms, Texan. Either take 'em or leave 'em!" There was no mistaking the raging fury behind the words. Holt's anger at being kept out of the fight showed on his face and no one in the room doubted his eagerness or ability to go for the tied-down guns on his legs.

Chandler swapped hard stares with him, saw no compromise in the rabid, faded eyes and shrugged, turning back to Bull Bear. "We'll be ready to drive out with th' dawn. Have your men thar!"

6

CALEB AND Jack Britt sat beside the singing stove in the kitchen of Sally's cafe drinking coffee. Bull Bear drank one cup and left after agreeing to have his warriors at the Texan's camp before sun-up.

"Caleb, you look sort o' used up." Britt's critical eyes scanned the filthy, ragged scarecrow beside him. He turned to Sally. "Ain't you got a dry shirt an' maybe a pair o' britches aroun' here some place he could borrow?"

Sally shook her head as she poured the second cup of steaming coffee into the heavy white mugs. There was a mantle of dark red in her cheeks. "No. Of course not. This is a cafe, not a clothing store."

Caleb smiled lop-sidedly. "I'll go down to the gen'al store in a few minutes an' get something dry. Jack, ya reckon that Chandler hombre's over his mad?"

Britt shook his head gravely. "No. Not by a damned sight. He's a hard man, Caleb. I've seen a lot just like him. They never give up."

" 'Reckon I'll sort o' go along with 'em on their drive then. 'Don't want 'em pickin' trouble with the Crows."

Britt set his empty coffee cup down and got up in his soggy clothes. "Well, that'd be a damned quick fight. Old Bull Bear's got about five to one with them Texans." He shook his head again. "He may be a sore head, but I don't think he's that mad. Well, I gotta get back to the ranch. If you ride over the canyon with 'em, Caleb, you probably won't be back till t'morrow night. I'll see you at the Lincoln House then." He opened the back door and stepped out into the rain with a wry shake of his head. "It'll take me till then to get wrung out." The door closed behind him and Caleb looked over at Sally.

"Scared?" he asked.

"Of course. Caleb, you ask the silliest questions some times." She blushed at her own boldness and got off her chair briskly. "I'll go over to the emporium and get you some new clothes." He watched her walk out of the room with an amused smile on his face. It would be interesting to see what she brought back.

When Caleb finally returned to the cold room in the Lincoln House, his side ached. Not so much from the bullet groove under his ribs as from the laughter that had threatened to engulf him at Sally's indignation when he

wouldn't wear the elegant, ankle-choker pants and shiny derby she had bought. He had left her as he had the night before, under the whiplash of her tongue, gone to the emporium himself and purchased a new pair of California pants and a butternut shirt, then gone to his room and laughed himself to sleep.

Dawn was a pink wraith of cleanliness over the steaming, wet world when Caleb mounted his black gelding and rode south out of Lodgepole. The new clothes were a little stiff and he ruefully looked at them in the light of day and wished he had his old fringed shirt back. The mud was slippery and heavy on his horse's hoofs as he rode. He was almost within smelling distance of the Texas cow camp when he was joined by a Crow Indian who came silently out of the brush and reined in beside him. He recognized the youth as the painted warrior he had seen in Bull Bear's teepee two days before.

"I remember you, but don't know your name."

"Running Horse."

Caleb nodded as he digested and filed the name. "Running Horse, how many Crows ride with the Texas cattle?"

"Many. Bull Bear say half the warriors must go. Many Crow warriors, not many white cowmen. No fight."

Caleb smiled softly as they rode into the Texas cow camp and saw Jeff Chandler giving orders to his fanning-out riders. That was like old Bull Bear. He didn't want any fighting with the whites which would bring soldiers and swift retaliation, so he had shrewdly sent so many Crow warriors, armed and livid in war regalia, that the Texans would be awed and careful. Chandler looked at Caleb for a full minute as he rode up without saying a word. Running Horse reined away toward his warriors, scattered around the vast, horn-rattling herd, with a warning in Crow, in an undertone. "Killer. Bad man. Silent Outcast, be careful!" Doorn affected not to hear and nodded to Chandler, who sneered and whirled his horse and abruptly rode away, leaving Caleb alone.

The drive was a bedlam of noise. The Texas cattle were half-wild and cagey. Bellowing, rattling their great horns and drumming a dull rumble over the soggy prairie, they moved out after the unexpected rest with the energy of two-thousand demons. For the first five miles, the Texans and Crows alike were kept busy turning back bolters and lining out leaders on the dim, washy trail that led into the canyon. The sky was as clear as a bell, but the warmth had not yet come out of the new sun. The canyon loomed up before them about ten o'clock, and the Crows made a sort of funnel out of themselves that steered the Texas cattle onto the narrow, slippery trail ahead. By the time the herd had gotten to the canyon, however, most of their surplus energy had been consumed and they were, for the most part, content to follow the critter ahead and leave the bolting and dragging to the tail end of the herd. They moved over the treacherous ground with calm acceptance and the Indians led them along at a mile-eating, long-legged walk.

With the drag came Jeff Chandler, swollen-faced and as touchy as a sidewinder, several Texas drovers, Running Horse, about thirty Crow warriors and Caleb Doorn. The drag was reluctant about following the other critters into the pass, and it took a little maneuvering. In the course of the endeavor, Caleb's big black horse

nudged Chandler's flashy sorrel. The Texan's rabid eyes came up shooting fire as Caleb apologized and rode on along the trail. Chandler quirted his way up behind Caleb. The trail was too narrow for their horses to get abreast.

"Ya done that a-purpose. Ah seen it. Rubbin' in your piece o' luck, ain't ya, squaw man!" Caleb bit back the gorge that arose within him and didn't answer. The men were well along on the trail by now, Caleb directly behind the cattle with Chandler behind him, Chandler's riders behind their employer and the silent, impassive Indians behind the Texans. Chandler's anger increased when Caleb ignored his taunt. "Damn squaw man! Get daown off'n that horse an ah'll beat ya to death fer what ya done yes'tiddy."

CALEB DIDN'T move until Chandler's screaming oaths were accompanied by his whistling quirt that cut through the butternut shirt and brought a quick rush of blood through the torn flesh. He was off his horse in a second, and as Chandler's startled mount leaped forward, caught hold of the big man and yanked him bodily off the saddle. Chandler hit the ground with a roar of rage and dropped his quirt. Caleb was suddenly very white-faced. Whichever man went down this time would very likely pitch to his death off the narrow trail and into the canyon far below where a faint, distance-muffled roar told the men on the trail that the rain had swollen a small creek to a torrential river.

Caleb heard a growled, guttural snarl behind him. He darted a quick look as Chandler rushed him. The Crows, slit-eyed and venemous, had their rifles poised and aimed at the nervous cowboys in front of them. Stealing the look at the enemies behind him almost cost Caleb his life. Chandler knocked him down by sheer body weight. He could feel the steel spring fingers grabbing at the cloth of his clothes. Chandler wanted to lift him high and throw him into the canyon. He rolled and twisted frantically to avoid the tremendous bulk of the larger man. Hot, fetid breath was on the side of his face and he looked into a pair of bloodshot, rabid eyes. The shattered nose was beginning to drip blood from the violent exertions. Caleb flung up one arm and struck the Texan high on the head. It overbalanced Chandler and Caleb heaved mightily to complete the loss of balance. Springing up with the speed of a snake, Caleb crouched waiting. Chandler, remembering how he had been chopped down while getting to his feet the day before, rolled backwards before rising.

There was no reckless confidence on the big man's face now. He was white with a seething hatred, but his eyes were diabolically cunning. Doorn circled a little, staying away from the edge of the trail. Chandler roared an oath and charged. Caleb met him desperately, braced and doggedly set. His fists flashed out like pile-drivers. Still the Texan came in, slowed a little, but still reaching for a hand-hold that would enable him to throw Caleb into the canyon. Again the hard fists popped and richotted off the driving hulk of bone and muscle. This time Chandler, hurt, stopped and swung. The blow swooshed through the air and Caleb rolled his head. Still, the knuckles tore past his ear with a tearing sound and the scout felt his blood running down over the torn shirt. He dropped low and rolled his shoulder with a slashing uppercut that sunk solidly into the big man's stomach. Chandler's eyes opened wide for a second and he gasped hoarsely, stepping away with a wobbly lurch.

Caleb, fighting the fight of his life, cold and unmerciful, moved in to follow up the injury done by his last strike. The Texan was looking anxious now, his face beaded in small, luminous drops of agonizing sweat. He threw out a massive arm to ward Caleb off. Caleb started to slide under it and slipped in the mud. He went down flat on his face, instinctively rolled sideways toward the edge of the can-

yon trail just as Chandler's boot smashed into his unprotected ribs. A fuzzy red shroud began to descend over his sight. An awful stitch of pain shot through him when he tried to breathe. Chandler roared a gasping, desperate cry of victory and threw himself on the prone, half-conscious form of the scout. Doorn rolled away from the edge of the trail by instinct. Consuming waves of nausea were coming up out of his bowels and sweeping over him. He locked his teeth and fought against them as he came groggily to one knee. Chandler, missing his victim with his body throw and roll, clambered up to his knees, wiped the thick, heavy mud from his hands and face, then lurched to his feet as Caleb straightened up.

The frontiersman's fists felt like lead weights as he forced them out defensively. The stitch in his side was making him desperately sick and he bent almost double to get relief. Chandler, recovered from his own abuse, was smiling triumphantly as he came in slowly, teeth bared through the puffy flesh of his face. The little eyes, sunken and overshadowed by the mounds of injured flesh, were vicious; like the eyes of a murderous weasel confronting a helpless victim; livid, anticipatory and merciless.

Chandler was swearing in a husky undertone. The voice was the only sound on the high trail overlooking the gorge below. Somewhere, far ahead, the bellowing of cattle floated back to the rigid watchers. The monotonous profanity was even and regularly spaced. Caleb watched the big body coming in. He planted his feet and forced himself almost erect, catching his breath with the effort. There could be no maneuvering or side-stepping now. His legs were rubber and his lungs were bellows of tortured, outraged flesh. Chandler was almost close enough now. Caleb forgot some of his agony in the desperation of what was ahead. Suddenly the big man lunged forward. The leaden fists swung methodically, on after the other. Caleb had the very rare ability of being able to hit as hard with one fist as he could with the other. Chandler rushed against the bruising knuckles. He pushed in trying to beat aside the pummeling fists, but they came through the air like the pendulum of a gigantic clock of bone and muscle. He slowed a little and still the fists slashed and jarred and thudded. He stopped altogether, a sob in his throat, swinging his own massive arms. Still the desperate, persistent knuckles smashed into him. His face was struck again and again and his head snapped back savagely with each blow. Now his mouth was open and a gorge of blood swelled out of it. Caleb took a step forward, still swinging with that ghastly, ashen look of the damned in his half-blind eyes. Another step forward and Chandler's big arms slowed and finally fell to his sides. Caleb walked forward flat-footed and fired all that remained in his body; one tremendous, earth-jarring swing that would have torn the head off a lesser man. Chandler was out on his feet, but he took an instinctive step backwards to escape the next blow, which could never come. It was one step too far, and his great body suddenly disappeared over the edge of the trail as Caleb went slowly down to his knees, shaking his head lollingly from one side to the other, fighting doggedly for the consciousness that was slipping from him, driven by a subconscious urging that was warning him insanely of a peril that no longer existed.

SALLY AND Jack Britt were drinking their second pot of coffee when Caleb opened his eyes. The red film was gone, but the side ache was a biting, searing jolt of agony with each breath.

Britt looked down at him anxiously. "How ya feel, Caleb?"

"Alive, but in small pieces."

The grizzled old cow man sighed loudly and looked weakly over at Sally. "Alive, he says, girl."

The deep violet eyes were big in a

[*Turn To Page* 81]

There's a time, the sheriff thought, when a man can't stand seeing his own face in a mirror. True, it was the face of a lawman who had upheld the law for many years. But Rubaker knew that it was a dishonest face . . .

LAWMAN ON A STRING

by Mal Kent

HE AWOKE hating the day, the town, and himself. When he put on his shirt, Rubaker rubbed the badge pinned on it, hardly aware of the motion. A pencil of sunlight thrust through the closed shutters of the room and played upon the sheriff's star; after fifteen years, it was still bright.

He looked into the mirror and decided not to shave; the glass was dusty. and he wiped it clean, looking distastefully at the man who stared back at him with equal coldness.

He stepped out onto the street and pulled the heavy watch out of his pocket. Eleven o'clock. The sun beat down upon his somewhat crumpled hat as he rubbed the watch against his pocket before putting it back. *Getting old,* he thought; *I used to be up with the sun.* He swallowed, and knew this was no explanation; Ned Garby was ten years older than Rubaker, and the blacksmith had been hard at work since sunup. The sheriff caught the elder man's eye as Garby straightened up and drew a calloused hand across his brow. Rubaker's faded blue eyes met Ned Garby's clear black eyes; their glances held a moment, then Garby nodded briefly and went back to work, his hammer-strokes ringing out in the still air.

Rubaker tried to remember how long it had been since Ned, and other oldtimers, had waved at him if they were busy. or had sung out a hello, with an invitation to step over for gossip. The most he got from them now was a quick nod.

Few people were on the streets at this hour; Rubaker looked up briefly to see Reverend Bryson emerging from

the barber shop; the lean man's somber face broke into a smile, and the sheriff half-wished that the dominie would give him the silent treatment too. He tried to decide which was harder to take; the half-pitying contempt of oldtimers and old friends—who knew him for what he was—or the amiable sympathy of the rest, who considered him merely aging in loyal service. He spat listlessly at a fly as Bryson came up.

"Good morning, Sheriff," the parson said. "Are these rumors I have been hearing true?" The man's face was bleak again.

Got to keep up appearances for Sue's sake, Rubaker thought, and wished for the thousand-and-first time that his niece could have fallen in love with someone from a neighboring town—or at the very least, someone other than young Steve Bryson.

"Don't know how the rumors have it, Dominie," Rubaker sighed. "But the story's simple enough. I came along last night late, to find Tom Newell saddling up a horse in a sort of suspicious manner, so I started asking questions. He seemed awfully rattled when I asked him, casual-like, what was up. Well, one question led to another, and when I got curious as to what was in his saddlebags, he just sort of went to pieces. Didn't try to start nothin'—just tried to run. I stopped him without much fuss, and took him over to the jail, booked him on suspicion, then rode out to Banker Morris'."

Bryson half-smiled. "It's saddening to learn that an upstanding-looking young man like Newell would turn out to be a thief. But you, Sheriff, you must have taken that line in the Book—about pride going before a fall—to heart in your youth. They tell me

you were just as diffident in telling of your accomplishments back in the old days, when this was quite a hell-town."

Rubaker rubbed his star, and muttered, "A man tries to do his job, Dominie." *Well, what I said was true,* he thought. But it wouldn't wash clean; there was much more to it than Rubaker told. He coughed. "Don't know how much more you've heard, Dominie; Newell had quite a collection of greenbacks and bonds with him, and it looks as if there's been monkey-business going on before now."

Bryson nodded, abstractly. "A man of the cloth, Sheriff, learns not to be too shocked when he encounters evil; there is so much in all of us. Still, I think this has been a blow to many of us; I know that Tom Newell was well-liked, and Jed Morris has been hit as roughly by this knowledge as by the realization that his bank has suffered serious losses. Are you going over to your office now?"

"Not right away."

"I wanted to speak to young Newell this morning. From your account, he may be repentant, and perhaps he'll be willing to help undo as much damage as possible. In any event, I shall comfort him as well as I can, without condoling his deeds."

Rubaker shook his head. "Dominie, I don't get you. You're no milk-and-honey preacher like some I've heard. You pound that there Bible of yours as hard as any of 'em, and you put the fear of damnation into every sermon. How come you're going soft on this crook?"

Bryson rested a hand on the sheriff's shoulder, a hand that was hard and firm, and his eyes seemed to look through a man. "My Lord is a saviour as well as a judge, Sheriff; I preach the fear of hell, yes, for that is the terrible danger we all face; but I also bring a message of hope to all who will listen, no matter what their sins."

Rubaker scratched his head. "Reckon it's your business, Dominie, just like sheriffin' is mine. But it don't sound like the real religion to me. Well, if you want to comfort this Newell fellow, you don't have to worry about him walkin' out on you."

HE WALKED up the steps to Mrs. Dolan's restaurant with a sour feeling. Funny how a man like Bryson, who'd outfaced hellbusters and converted renegades in his younger days, could go soft that way.

Why hasn't he ever chewed me out? Rubaker thought. *Can't tell me that he doesn't even suspect I'm nothin' more than a fancy errand-boy for Ben Hoyt, helpin' him get control of this town.*

The lone eating-place was nearly empty. Rubaker looked around, instinctively cataloguing the faces, then sat down at a table and picked up the neatly-printed menu as if he'd never seen it before, and was about to order something.

"Ab," came Martha Dolan's voice, "you're not going to get out of here today with just a cup of coffee; you need a healthy breakfast. Now I've got some real nice ham, and I'm going to fix it up for you with eggs and potatoes the way you like them."

He put the menu down thinking of Pat Dolan as he had been, before Hoyt had frozen out his freight-line with competition Dolan couldn't overcome, then bought him out. Pat had died of pneumonia, the doctor said, but Rubaker knew what had really killed him.

"Don't feel like eatin', Martha," he said. "Just bring me cawfee; my innards won't take nothin' else at this time of day."

"Now, don't let yourself get all upset, Ab. It's no fault of yours if a bank-clerk turns out to be a no-good thief. Why, a body'd think you were supposed to be like that Sherlock Holmes person Mr. Morris talks about, and know everything about a man as soon as you've looked at him. You did your part in seeing to it that Tom Newell didn't manage to run out with all our money."

She busied herself at the stove, but Rubaker knew that, now she'd started, the talk would go on. He looked at her back, watching as she turned half-sideways, and thought, *She's still a looker, after all she's been through. If I'd had someone like her around, maybe I'd have spit in Hoyt's eye, instead of kowtowin' to him.*

"Just plumb good luck, Martha," he said. "I happened to be at the right place at the right time, so they gave me all kinds of credit. Hell, I didn't know that Newell was fixin' to run out."

"Well, Sheriff," spoke up one of the other customers, one of the new hands at Hoyt's hotel, "it was just as good as having second sight, then. Bet you just had a feeling you ought to walk around without knowing why."

"Yes," chimed in Martha Dolan, "don't give us that modest talk, Ab. We all know you're right there when it counts, even if you haven't been feeling too good in the past year or so. Why, even Ben Hoyt has a good word to say about you now, though that's not much of a recommendation."

The hotel hand paid his bill and nodded as he started for the door. "Old Hoyt ain't one to hand out compliments, Sheriff, unless there's a good reason. When he's satisfied that something's good, you can be sure it is."

"Huh," snorted Martha; "that isn't *my* idea of a compliment. I suppose he'll decide this is a good town when they change the name to Hoytville."

"Look, ma'am," protested the hotel hand, "I ain't lookin' for an argument with my meals. I can get them home for free." He laid down a tip and made a hasty exit.

Martha Dolan stood looking after him. "It's too bad Hoyt's saying good things about you now, Ab; I liked it better when he was tryin' to run you out of office."

Rubaker felt a stabbing in the pit of his stomach. *Sure, Hoyt's talking me up, now; he pays my salary, and gets his money's worth.* The salary that the town paid might have been enough, if he hadn't been sick. Citizens had contributed generously for Rubaker's operation then, and only the sheriff and Hoyt knew how much more had been needed, and where it had come from. And once it had started...

"Ab," Martha was saying, "is it true what they say? That this Newell person stole a lot of money from the bank, and Hoyt is going to hand Mr. Morris a big loan so that none of us will lose our savings?"

Rubaker sighed. There was no hope of avoiding the question now. Martha was busy with her fixings, and he knew that—worse still—he'd have to choke some food down. More in desperation, than in hope, he started, "Now, look, Martha, I said I didn't want any..."

"Never you mind, Abner Rubaker. It's time some honest woman started to take care of you, and I'm not going to see you walking around town on a day like this with only a cup of coffee under your belt. Well, from what *I* heard," she underlined the statement with a rattle of silverware as she placed a heaped-up platter and a cup of coffee under his nose, "this Newell person was working with a gang, but they were using a different system. None of your old-fashioned Jesse James ride-in-and-hold-up business; oh, no, they're modern, they are.

"They arrange for Newell to get a job at the bank, and he starts stealing money, and mixing the books up, so that poor old Jed Morris doesn't know what's going on. Then, when the time is right, Newell merely rides out, as calm as you please, with a big sack of money...sort of the last straw before the bank collapses. Only you caught him, Ab."

Rubaker buried his face in the oversized coffee cup, without bothering to ask why a gang would be necessary for an operation like this. He set it down, blowing morosely. "Yeah," he agreed, "it was lots slicker than the old-fashioned way. Less exciting, too, I reckon. No one would get shot, including the sheriff."

And no one would know, he thought,

that the sheriff was as guilty as if he'd stolen the greenbacks and bonds himself.

"Lots of us wouldn't have minded if you'd shot him, Ab. I just felt sick when I heard that Tom Newell wasn't even armed, and that he surrendered meek as a lamb when you caught him."

That wasn't part of the deal, the sheriff thought.

"We'd have appreciated a real gunfight like you had with the Clarendon bunch a dozen years ago. Jail's too good for the likes of that one."

Rubaker's hand eased down toward his holster, wistfully. A dozen years ago; was it only that far back? His hand was still sure; he knew it. His eyes were as sharp as ever. But would there ever again be any need for either?

"Huh," he said, "you wouldn't want to see Newell strung up like he'd have been in the old Vigilante days, would you? Time's gone when old Judge Colt hands down decisions on the spur of the moment." His voice dropped. "This town's run by law and order."

Martha Dolan sniffed. "Oh, is that what Ben Hoyt calls himself now? Shouldn't be surprised, now that he's moving in on the bank. I wish he'd try something illegal, Ben, so you could put him in your jail where he belongs." She looked steadily at Rubaker, and the sheriff's eyes dropped.

"Now, Ab, you're not walking out of here until you've finished every mouthful." She turned away as the liveryman came in and ordered the same; Rubaker sighed in relief as the chatter turned to the latest arrival.

Then he looked at the heaped-up platter in front of him and groaned.

THERE was a smile on Ben Hoyt's face as the sheriff walked into the mercantile, belching a little and loosening his belt. The small man's lips curved, and his white teeth shone, but there was no warmth in his eyes. Rubaker remembered that Hoyt had smiled the same way when he was trying to persuade townsfolk to vote for another candidate for sheriff a few years back. The same smile had been on Hoyt's face after Rubaker's overwhelming victory at the polls, when the man had come in to congratulate the winner. And when, during the sheriff's illness, he'd offered "assistance..."

Rubaker had thrown Hoyt's kind into the lockup on sight, back in the days when the gun he wore was something more than an ornament, and sent them on the next morning with a warning not to come back.

"Want to see you, Sheriff," Hoyt said softly, motioning with his head to the back room. "Important business." Rubaker nodded, and followed the man.

Once inside, the smile vanished, but there wasn't much difference that Rubaker could see. He looked at the spiderish face, and wondered again how this man could possibly be a nephew of bluff old Charley Hoyt, who'd built the mercantile in the boom days, and kept it running until a broken hip had crippled and finished him off.

"Unfortunate," said Hoyt, "that you happened along when Tom Newell was leaving...but, of course, your duty was plain."

The sheriff looked at him, and tried to read some sort of worry or concern behind Hoyt's expression. There was none visible; he was as bland as a stage gambler. Only the slight hesitation in his speech betrayed him. Rubaker lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "It's out of my hands now, Ben," he said.

Hoyt rubbed his hands together; and again, there was more of the cardsharp in the gesture than the merchant. "So it is, Ab, so it is. And...in more ways than you meant when you said that. You realize that young Newell must not come to trial."

For a moment, Rubaker forgot his position here as a pawn in the game. Something reached out of the past; something arose and gripped him. He felt his hand nearing his gun-butt as he answered roughly, "Don't try any-

thing; Newell's my prisoner, and he'll stay my prisoner. There'll be no lynching, or talk of lynching."

The sound of his voice surprised him, even as the moment died, and he knew himself to be an empty shell again. His hand moved away from his gun, and Rubaker rubbed the star on his soiled shirt. "I'll have no part in murder, legal or otherwise," he added, but there was no force behind his words.

"Murder?" asked Hoyt in a surprised voice. "Lynching? Certainly not, Ab. You're an honest man; you've done nothing in violation of the laws. Your duty now is to assist a leading citizen of this town."

Rubaker sat down. "Don't try to stuff me, Ben; don't try to make it pretty. I'm tired of fancy words. You mean that my duty is to assist you." He looked at the floor, and continued in a toneless voice, "I know what I've done, and why I did it. You were against me, and I knew you could break me. So I played it your way... and closed my eyes to the rottenest things I've ever seen."

The other sneered. "Well, really, Ab, I can't accept any responsibility for your conscience; that's your affair. I need a law officer who can understand that my business should not be interfered with, so long as I am violating no law... .

"They didn't like me when I came here, and some don't like me now. Well, that is unfortunate, but I represent progress in this town, Ab. I shall run this town, and it will be a stronger community, because—"

"Shut up before I puke in your face," Rubaker interrupted. "I've gone back on my trust because I was afraid. You've got my corruption hanging over me; all right. But I don't have to hear how fine and legal it all is, because nothing will make it stink any less than it does."

HOYT SHRUGGED. "You make me sound like the villain in a melodrama, Ab. I'm a sharp businessman; all right, there's nothing wrong with that. Oldtimers couldn't see what was coming, but the men and women who have jobs here because I created them, because I've helped build this town, won't go for your viewpoint.

"Why don't you accuse me of conniving to make your niece fall in love with Reverend Bryson's boy, so I can hold that over your head, too? And, perhaps Ben Hoyt is the one who's built up this legend of Honest Ab Rubaker, the town tamer—the legend that is dearer to you than life, as it says in the play."

"You don't have to spell it out for me," the other muttered. "I know it all by heart. And I know something else. Maybe I never broke any of the laws I'm supposed to defend, but a lawman's got a bigger responsibility than an ordinary citizen. You and the other people are only supposed to obey the laws; I'm supposed to uphold them, too."

"Which you've done admirably, Sheriff."

"Maybe you think so; yeah, maybe that's the way you see it, because it all ran in your favor. But I think you're a lot of bluff, Ben. You wouldn't be worried now, if you were as clean as you make out to be...if all the things I haven't noticed, or kept quiet about when I should have been asking questions, were as fair and square as you pretended."

Rubaker shoved his hat back and got to his feet. "And you're up to your neck in this bank business. Newell was working for you; I knew that. If he stole money, he stole it under your orders."

Hoyt's manner changed abruptly. "That's enough, Ben. I'll tolerate just so much and no more. As a law officer, you ought to know better than to make any charges you can't prove.

"Whatever Newell stole, he stole on his own. And I'm accepting my share of responisbility—as you say, he was my man—by loaning Jed Morris enough to tide him over."

"Yeah. For which bit of public spirit, you get a controlling interest in

the bank. One reason why Morris has been hurt is because he hasn't been snapping the whip at everyone who owed him money."

"The bank," Hoyt said firmly, "will be put on a sound basis; I shall take no share in the profits. But enough of that. I had my own plans for Newell, when I learned what was up, but you spoiled them by coming along at the wrong moment. This time, I'm letting you know what is up, so you won't stumble in on it accidently. Everything is laid out for tonight, and..."

..."And I'll have no part in whatever it is," Rubaker finished.

The smile was back on Hoyt's face. "Oh, but you will, Sheriff. You will. I don't like to play the role of the melodramatic villain, but since you force me to, I might be able to swing it, at that. You'll do as I say, Ab. Now, your part in it will be like this..."

RUBAKER stumbled out of the store a few minutes later, and went behind the building. He still felt sick when he came back into the street.

I'm caught, he thought; *my sins have caught me.* He knew he had to play the part. The star on his chest gleamed momentarily in the bright sun, and he caught at it, as if to tear it away. He walked into his office woodenly, and sat down at the desk as if he never expected to rise again.

From the corner of the window, a buzzing sound came to his ears. He looked to see a fly entangled in one of the numerous spiderwebs. It was struggling fiercely, and seemed almost free. Rubaker watched dully.

Just one more pull, he thought.

The fly couldn't quite make it, and its buzzing was growing weaker. He could see the dark bulk of the spider in a corner of the web. Rubaker picked up a ruler on the desk and poked at the net, tearing away the part that held the fly. The insect was crawling over the bottom of the ruler now. Some of the web still stuck to it, but it was free. It rested there a moment, cleaning itself, then buzzed up and away, out the door.

"Sheriff," came a voice from the corner cell. "Is that you, Sheriff?"

Rubaker frowned and turned slightly. "What do you want, Newell? Your lunch will be over in a few minutes."

"I'm not hungry," the other said hesitantly. "What are you planning for me?"

Rubaker walked slowly over to the cell and looked at the prisoner silently. Newell was still in his working suit, a bit crumpled but on a par with most folks' Sunday clothes. He gave the appearance of being shorter than he really was, and smaller; his natural complexion was a little paler than others, who worked out in the open. Prison-pallor wouldn't be much of a change, Rubaker thought.

"You'll get a fair trial," he said slowly; "and if you tell all you know, it'll go easier with you than if you clam up."

The younger man looked haggard, and he licked his lips nervously. "What—what I can tell isn't much more than you know, Sheriff. I'm guilty; I admit it. The temptation was too big, what with all the opportunity right there, and old Morris not checking up on me too closely. There's—there's nobody else in it but me."

Rubaker shook his head. "You won't get off any easier by sticking to that story, Newell. I've got evidence to show you're concealing something—shielding someone."

He expected a reaction, but not the look of sheer terror that crossed the young man's weakish face. "No—no," he gasped. "It isn't true! I—I wasn't working for anybody else; it was all my doing!"

Rubaker shook his head wearily. "Won't wash, Newell. You're too scared; you wouldn't be if what you said just now was true."

Newell sat down on the cot and buried his head in his hands. "You—you got to believe me, Sheriff. He'll—" He looked up, his eyes darting around the cell. "My head feels sick," he mut-

tered. "I—I don't know what I'm saying. . . .What was I saying? . . .You're not going to let them hang me, Sheriff. You can't. I admit it; I'm guilty. . . I. . ." He broke off and threw himself face down on the cot, sobbing.

After a while, he rolled over. "You—you were just testing me, weren't you—to make sure I'd tell the right story? I—I won't tell, no matter what they promise me. I did it; that's all. . ."

Rubaker sighed. "Better get some sleep," he said. He wondered what Bryson had said to Newell, what kind of "comfort" the preacher had given.

He looked up as his deputy, Pete Clayson, came in. "How are folks taking it?" he asked.

Clayson took off his hat, and ran his fingers through his reddish hair. "Hard to tell, Ab. Can't say whether they're more relieved that Hoyt's making a loan to the bank to protect their savings, or afraid of what Hoyt's influence will do." He glanced at the still form of Newell. "A bit of talk I don't like going around," he added in low tones.

Rubaker caught his breath. "Lynch talk?"

"In a way. They don't want to hang Newell; they just want to get a full confession out of him. Someone's been spreading the rumor that Newell's working with a gang."

"Plain foolishness," grunted the sheriff. "Why would Newell want to split his take with anyone else?"

"That's what I've been arguin'." Clayson said. "But the idea seems to have caught hold. Maybe I'd better stay here with you tonight, just in case."

Rubaker was about to nod, but he caught himself in time. That wasn't the play. He glanced at the motionless man inside and thought, *He was caught just like I was, maybe.* He wondered what hold Ben Hoyt had over the young man as he rubbed his badge.

"Won't be necessary, Pete. I can handle anything that happens tonight. Besides, I've got an important errand for you." He paused, trying not to gag. "You—got to ride over to the County seat; important papers to be delivered, and I can't wait for the stage." He got up quickly; before the redhead could protest. "You take over now, while I get some sleep; I'll relieve you after supper, then you can get started."

"I could get back tonight," Clayson offered.

"You might have to wait until morning for stuff to bring back." He looked up at the torn spider-web as he picked up his hat and started for the door.

"Ab," said Clayson, "would you do something, even if it sounds a bit foolish?"

"What?"

"Deputize somebody to stick around with you tonight. I have a strong hunch."

Rubaker paused, as if pondering. "Yeah," he said, "that might not be a bad idea. It'll look good, even if it ain't necessary, as I think it isn't. That make you feel better, Pete?"

The deputy nodded. "I'll remember that." He forced a weak smile as he went out.

AT TEN-THIRTY, Rubaker left the jail in charge of Special Deputy Flynn, the liveryman, hand-picked by Ben Hoyt, and went over to Hoyt's *Tophand Saloon.* That was according to the plan. It was a week night, only townsfolk being there, for the most part; the street was dark, save for the lights of the saloon spilling out.

He pushed through the batwing doors, feeling like a puppet on strings, manipulated by Ben Hoyt somewhere offstage.

Flynn had been here earlier, had come back to the jail to report that talk was getting ugly, and the sheriff had better drop in and put a stop to it. Rubaker stood there for a moment, and looked around.

Over at a corner of the bar, someone was saying, "He ought to be strung up; that's what ought to happen."

"How will we get the rest of the

gang?" another wanted to know. "I hear tell Newell wasn't in this alone."

"He'll talk with a rope around his neck," growled the first speaker.

That was Rubaker's cue. He stepped forward, and called out roughly, "That'll be enough, Flanders. We're not having any lynch-talk while I'm the law, here."

"Not having too much law, either—except for a certain kind," another man said, and Rubaker recognized the speaker as Ned Garby. "Real tame town you've made this, Sheriff. No more shootings, no more guns. Man can walk the streets in peace—so long as he tips his hat to Mr. Ben Hoyt's tame sheriff."

"You're drunk, Ned," Rubaker said. He turned and stabbed a finger at the man who was speaking when he came in. "You, mister. What makes you think you're bigger than the law?"

The other spat. "You got a gun, and I ain't," he said. "All right, what if I did say Newell ought to hang? What's going to happen to him?"

"He's going to stand trial—just the same way you, or I, or anyone else around here would, in the same circumstances. If he tells everything he knows, so much the better for him—but he won't get off scott-free, no matter what.

"It isn't a question of whether he's guilty, because he was caught in the act, and he admitted it in front of witnesses. What the jury decides will just be how much he's guilty of, and what the judge decides will be just how stiff the sentence ought to be."

They paused, then added, "I've got my savings in the bank, too."

"Yes," agreed Garby, "I guess you have, Rubaker. And when you retire, you'll have your savings. But that's all you'll have. If you'd retired a few years back, you'd have had a lot more than that—you'd have had the respect of your fellow citizens." He flung a coin on the bar, pushed back his hat and trudged out of the saloon.

"You let him talk to you like that, Sheriff?" someone wanted to know.

"Ned's an old man," said Rubaker, barely recognizing his voice, "and this is a free town. You can all think what you like of the lawman so long as you obey the law.

"Right now, the law says it's time for you all to go home. But there's one thing you'd better think about." He paused for breath. This wasn't in the act, but he couldn't stop now. "There's been lynch-talk going on around here tonight, and none of you stopped to wonder who started it. Who is it who doesn't want to see Newell come to trial? Who's afraid he might talk?"

By the looks on their faces, he knew he'd hit a responsive chord. There wouldn't be more than a couple of Hoyt men here; he was sure of that. "There's more behind this than it looks like on the surface," he continued. He stopped suddenly, cold sweat beginning to run down his back as he realized he was getting in deep water. Rubaker knew he had to go along with the plan.

"*Maybe* Newell was working alone, and maybe he wasn't. But lynch-talk usually means that someone wants to shut a crook up, before it's too late."

Rubaker knew that wasn't what he had started out to say. He brushed against his star, and leaned against the bar. "One more round," he said, "then you all go home."

HE DOWNED his shot of whiskey, his eyes on the clock. Soon, now. A couple of men were drinking beer, and they'd linger over the last glass. That was all right; that was according to the plan.

A single explosion came from outside, down the street.

"Hey...something's—!" burst out Hoyt's man, but Rubaker was already starting for the door, his gun out before he reached it. He stood in the batwing doors, spotted, a perfect target, thinking how phony it all was.

Just for an instant; he had to make it look good. Then he was running down the side of the street, keeping to shadows, along the short distance to

the jail. He saw one man climbing into saddle as he approached, and another waiting. The mounted one would be the man Hoyt had hired to make the jailbreak, and the second Newell himself.

Now the mounted one touched steel to his horse's flanks, and his hand came up. Rubaker didn't wait to see the glint of gun metal in the moonlight; he ducked down, even as a bullet whined well to one side of him, and muzzle-flame winked. The man roared past.

He straightened, his gun ready, and called, "Halt or I'll shoot!" to Tom Newell, as the latter made to follow his companion. There was no reply; Newell was unarmed. Rubaker lifted his gun, aware that faces were appearing in windows, people were ready to fill the streets as soon as this was over.

Newell made no move to stop; he, too, touched spurs to his horse, and according to plan, Rubaker prepared to send a shot just over the man's head. It would all have happened so fast that no one could blame him for missing.

And, at that moment, the string broke.

This act he was about to do—this bit of corruption was no worse, he thought, than others he'd done for the past years. It wasn't as bad, perhaps; maybe Newell would break the ropes that tied him, too, once he was free. Even as his hand came up, Rubaker marveled at it, at whatever strength had come up in him to make his aim true; he squeezed the trigger, and saw Newell topple off the horse, with a slug in his shoulder.

He walked forward slowly, blowing down the barrel of his gun, sure that the first horseman would not come back. He knew that townsfolk were coming out onto the street, now—saw the first arrivals, yet did not see them. "Lift him gently," Rubaker heard his voice saying; "his shoulder's probably busted, and he's bleeding. Someone get the doctor."

Ben Hoyt was suddenly in the front of the throng, purple with rage. "You —you—" he started.

"It's all right, Ben," the sheriff said loudly, so that all could hear. "He didn't get away, and I didn't kill him; he'll live to stand trial, and tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Tom Newell moaned softly, and started to roll over.

"Look out!" cried Hoyt in an alarmed voice. "He's got a hideout gun!" Hoyt had a derringer in his hand, and was aiming it at the wounded Newell's head.

"No he ain't," someone started to say, trying to push against Hoyt. It was too late; Hoyt's derringer fired, but the shot was matched by another explosion that came from the sixgun Rubaker still held in his hand. The derringer ball plowed harmlessly into the dirt, and Hoyt crumpled.

"You knew he didn't have a gun, Ben," Rubaker said. "You're under arrest for attempted murder."

The little man's eyes glared and his mouth worked. He tried to lift the derringer, but it fell from limp fingers. A single forefinger pointed at Rubaker. "He—he—was in it, too," he croaked to the crowd, no member of which stepped forward to help him as he collapsed.

THE MORNING sun's rays found Rubaker still sitting at his desk, head buried in his arms, the empty bottle lying on the floor beside his hat. He opened one red-rimmed eye as a pounding came at the door, lurched to his feet and opened it, admitting Bryson.

"Come on in," he said tiredly, his voice less thick than he expected it would be. "I've been expecting you."

The sheriff sat down heavily in the chair. "It's all true," he muttered.

"Ah," said Bryson, "Ben Hoyt died last night."

"Good," he muttered. "One good thing I've done, at least."

"I was with him at the end," Bryson continued. "Ben Hoyt knew he was

dying; he knew the terrible fate that hung over him, and he repented his crimes. He confessed everything, and prayed to the Lord for mercy."

"Huh!" snorted Rubaker. "Thought he could fix everything up, eh?"

"He swore that you were blameless Ab; that he had deliberately put you in a bad light; that he had accused you falsely. I think he saw the light at the end."

"But that won't do him any good will it, Dominie?"

Rubaker stooped and reached for the bottle. He held it up to the sunlight saw it was empty, and hurled it across the room. "I take it back, Dominie; I said I was glad. Well, I ain't; I'm sorry he died so easy. But it won't be easy on him in the next world, will it?"

Bryson took out his pipe and tobacco thoughtfully. "I gave him what comfort I could, and that was no little thing. If his repentance was sincere, as I think it was, there is hope for Ben Hoyt."

"I don't believe it!" Rubaker burst out. "I don't believe a man can be rotten all his life and then make it up in one little burst of repenting."

"That is why I came to see you, Ab," the parson continued. "He's gone now and whatever hold he had over you has gone with him. Ben Hoyt could have had revenge on you, but he wouldn't take it. I think he will be forgiven. He may have to work it out in one way or another, but I think he will be forgiven nonetheless—just as all of us will, if we repent in time."

He stood up. "I hope the time will come when you will forgive Ben Hoyt too, Ab; not for his sake, but for your own."

"I don't want forgiveness!" Rubaker burst out. "I know what I've done and what I am. I'm a traitor to everything I believed in, and I'm as guilty as he was. I could have refused to play his game, but I chose evil, and that's what I am now— I took the devil's pay, and the devil's got me!"

Bryson sighed and got up slowly, knocking his pipe against the desk. "I won't try to save a man who's determined to go to perdition. The Lord gave us free will, Ab, and that means you've got a right to be damned if you're determined to be. But I hope—and I shall pray—that you see things differently before it's too late."

Rubaker stared at the parson's back as he left, and rubbed the star on his shirt. "I don't want forgiveness," he repeated. "I want to see him burn in hell alongside of me."

He got up, hating the day, and drew the blinds against the bright sun. He went to the door, hating the town, and closed it. But it was the face that stared out at him from his mirror that he hated most of all...

Coming Next Issue ★ ★ ★

A Thrilling New Feature Novel by

G. W. Barrington

don't miss

SECRET OF THE BADLANDS

There was one reason why Charley Hiss couldn't have murdered Milton Kempter — if anybody would believe it, that is.

INCIDENT AT SWING TREE

by Gene Rodgers

CHARLEY HISS was a big-boned, dog-eared fellow with more brawn than brains. Neighboring folks agreed that he was honest, and did a full day's work for his day's pay, but young Charley was too inclined to daydream. After working for more than one day at any of the local ranches, Charley soon found himself among the unemployed, swapping jokes at the saloon in Swing Tree, or watching the card-games that were invariably in progress.

It was on a particularly cool afternoon that Charley urged his aged mare across the flats outside of town, the wind whipping at his face. Thoughts of women throwing themselves at him, or men cowing in quaking fear of his approach, filled his blond head as he

rode. A masked owlhooter drew his twin .45s in Charley's vivid imagination, and the gangling youth drew his own gun, its chipped butt scratching his ham-like hand. Before he fully realized what he was doing, the youth fired at the imaginary outlaw, and the black-shirted terror fell dead, a gaping bullet hole centering ferret-like eyes.

The report of his pistol mingled with the acrid smell of gunpowder, aroused the rider to the present, and Charley glanced about him. Glad that no one had seen his actions, the youth smiled sheepishly, then jammed the Colt back into its pock-marked holster.

A low, moaning wind increased in tempo, and the biting cold awakened Charley to the fact that his right hand was bleeding.

"Musta cut it when I drew my iron," Charley said to the mare. With instinct born of long association, the old horse increased its gait, and Charley patted the animal fondly on its black neck. A practiced eye roved the horizon, and the realization came to the rider that snow would soon come, blotting out the trail and closing down the activities in Swing Tree.

The latter thought sobered the youth. If no work was to be had, that was perfectly all right. But if the trail was shut tight by a mountain of snow, then there would be little opportunity to ride into town to swap stories with the gang, or to sit in on the nickel-and-dime poker games.

He was still half an hour's ride from town, and the wind kicked up curtains of sand to delay him. Charley had promised Milton Kempter that he would be in town by three o'clock, when the boys usually gathered to discuss life in general and the lack of work in particular.

Snow began to drift down, and the wind kicked dead brush across the desert. A scrawny tree waved thin arms grotesquely in the distance, and a light veil of snow already covered its upper limbs.

Now, the snow pelted down in great globs, and Charley wished he had brought a coat with him. His thin jacket offered slight protection against the elements, but the mare kept its slackening pace until, with a sigh of relief, Charley drew rein outside the saloon.

A great hubub was going on inside, and the youth wondered what it was that could cause such excitement. His curiosity piqued, Charley took the steps two at a time, and pushed through the batwings, all thoughts of the cold, bitter day left outside.

Five men were seated at a rear card table, and it was Sheriff Royce who first noticed Charley. The lawman arose, pointed a quavering finger at the youth, and said, "There's Hiss."

When all had turned to see whom the finger was pointed at, the sheriff added, "Only a danged fool would walk in like that, Hiss."

"What are you talkin' 'bout?" Charley asked.

"Don't waste your time palaverin'," the lawman chided. "You're under arrest for the murder of Milton Kempter!"

IT TOOK several moments for the full import of the sheriff's accusation to sink into Charley's travel-weary brain, such as it was. The corn-haired youth's mouth gaped open, and he stammered, "What're you talkin' that way for, Sheriff? For a minnit, you had me believin' you."

"I don't fool thetaway," Royce said coldly. "You killed Kempter, and I'm afraid I'm gonna have to take you in like any other killer."

"That's too good for him," a voice called from the rear; "string him up here and now!"

"Shut up, Mel!" the lawman snapped. "Charley'll get a trial—all fair and square—just like you'd wanna get if it were you."

"You—you mean," Charley swallowed nervously, "that Milt is dead? And you think I done it?"

"That's about the size of it," Royce said.

"How—how'd it happen?" Charley asked.

"String him up!" Mel shouted again.

"He ain't been convicted yet," Sheriff Royce said bitterly. "Man's entitled—"

"He ain't entitled to no more'n a rope," Mel answered.

Charley and Mel had never liked each other, even as kids, and the dislike had grown until now it was akin to actual hatred. However, both men steered clear of each other, and were stiffly-formal when a chance meeting occured.

"When did you fire your gun last?" Royce asked.

"Lemme see," Charley said, scratching his head. Brightening, he said, "Two days ago; shot me a rattler over near old Gus' end-section."

The sheriff took Charley's gun, sniffed at the barrel, then said, "This was fired today, Charley; more'n likely, a couple of hours ago."

"What more proof do you need?" Mel sneered. "I say—"

"I'll pistol-whip you if you don't shut up," Royce barked. "I'm the law in Swing Tree, and I say that Charley gets a fair trial."

"How'd it happen?" Charley wanted to know.

"Milt was ridin' in towards town." the lawman explained, "an' he took a slug in his back. Busted him clear outta the saddle, it did. Ted Dixon found him a few minutes later, and he come by to tell me; also said he seen you firin' your gun a minute before, but he didn't pay it no mind—that is, until he found Milt."

"I remember now," Charley flushed. "I—I seen a rabbit, and took a pot-shot at him."

"And hit Milt in the back instead!" Mel quipped.

"Milt had his knife in his hand," Royce added. "Say, your hand's cut."

"What did I tell you, Sheriff?" Mel asked.

"How long's he been here?" Charley asked, nodding at Mel.

"Two hours easy," the lawman answered.

"But," Charley said, "I didn't kill Milt."

"Save it," the sheriff said. "Come along now, son."

ALL THE way down to the jail, Charley kept insisting that he was innocent, but to no avail. By nightfall, with the town gossips chewing over the latest piece of news, the citizens of Swing Tree had already tried, convicted, and hung Charley Hiss.

It was noon of the next day when the aroused townsfolk began the rumbling of disgust and anger that usually led to a mob of bloodthirsty men storming the jail to haul the protesting prisoner away.

The beginning took place in the saloon, spread to the general store, and soon everyone was reaching fever-pitch. It seemed as if Mel Wintrub's face was everywhere; at each new muttering of threats, Mel was in the middle, inciting the crowd to action.

Sun went down, and night fell on Swing Tree. The sheriff had taken the precaution of doubling the normal guard inside the jail, and he stayed on the hard cot in the corner throughout the night.

Time seemed to stand still as the hours dragged by on leaden heels. With the closing of the saloons, the noise and general unrest seemed to melt somewhat, but the silence that took its place was even worse.

An old hand in such matters, the sheriff knew full well that there was going to be some trouble before dawn. When he heard the tromp of booted feet coming around the corner, he knew that the trouble was upon him.

A mob of angry, threatening men soon were at the door. Fists pounded on the wooden frame, and cries of, "String him up!" filled the bitter-cold, gloomy night. Seeking to arm himself with all the weapons at his disposal, the lawman reached for Charley's holster, strapped it around his own, and quickly checked the load.

The crowd outside got noisier, and despite the cold, the volume swelled until even the sound of the blustering wind howling around corners of buildings faded beside it.

Then, the sheriff took matters into his hands. He knocked away the bar holding the door closed, unlocked the padlock, and stepped out to face the hostile mob. There was a shifting of feet and lowering of eyes, but no one back off.

"No sense in your stayin' here all night," the Sheriff intoned. "It won't do you no good anyhow, 'cause Charley Hiss broke jail two hours ago!"

CHARLEY HISS was already riding slowly across the flats, his mare moving at a steady, but slightly less than a trotting pace. The winds curled around him, biting through his thin jacket and turning his lips blue.

From behind, an eerier voice shouted, "Hold up!"

Charley turned, saw the form of Mel Wintrub materialize out of the snow, and then the gangling youth applied spurs to his mare. In a shower of snow, the animal leaped ahead, and kept a good distance ahead of Mel's mount until he topped a rise close by the B Bar B.

Mel rode up moments later, his eyes twin slits against the cold night. Charley, afoot now, stumbled in the snow, fell to a slithering, tumbling skid that sprayed fine snow powder all about him. Grasping the reins of his mare, Charley got to his feet.

"What's eatin' on you, Wintrub?"

"I'm gonna take you in, killer; feet first!" came the reply.

"Look whose callin' *me* a killer." Charley said. "Any fool'd know you done Milt in to get back what you lost at poker."

"True enough," Mel admitted, "but where you're goin', that information ain't gonna do much good."

"You—you killed him just for the money?" Charley asked.

"He had over a thousand on him." Mel said. "He was totin' the Slash-W payroll back to the ranch, too."

"And you went and killed him for that!" Anger possessed Charley now, and a gun spun from its holster in a blur-fast move.

"I—I thought the Sheriff got your guns," Mel said.

"He did," Charley said; "but he gave 'em back."

"What do you mean by that?" Mel asked.

"Jus' what I said," Charley replied. "When the Sheriff seen that I didn't do it, he gimme back my irons."

Mel tried to speak, but Charley brushed the interruption aside. "He knowed that I didn't kill Milt, and he also knowed that you were the only other feller who could have found out how much Milt was totin'."

"You're bluffing," Mel sneered.

"No, I ain't," Charley said.

The winds whipped around the blond youth's head and shoulders, but somehow, he didn't mind it so much now. Charley went on, "I ain't the kinda guy'd go around shootin' holes in my best friends, and the Sheriff knowed this."

"So," Mel said nervously.

"So he released me," Charley said with a smile. "He just opened the door, I walked out, and that's all there was to it."

"You're lying!" Mel said.

"No I ain't," Charley answered.

"The sheriff couldn't release you," Milt said; "killin' ain't a bailable offense."

"I weren't set out on bail," Charley said. "I was turned free."

"But—"

"That's all there is," Charley said, "exceptin' that I forgot one little thing."

"What's that?" Mel asked hesitantly.

"Milt was totin' a load of money," Charlie said, "and everybody around here knows that Milt don't carry so much with him at a time. There was a reason for him totin' one thousand dollars."

"You're bluffing," Mel added.

"No, sir," Charley said. "The Sheriff got the idea when I had him look at my gun. Anybody who kills so quick wouldn't think of keeping the old shell in the chamber. An' a guy like me—one who likes to fiddle around with guns—ain't the type to forget a blank shell."

CHARLEY stopped, stomped his feet to drive the cold out, then went on. "When the Sheriff knowed all this, he left me go free."

"But—"

"The big thing is this," Charley added. "I'm gettin' married next week, an' I wanted to draw my money outta the bank. So I told Milt to take it out for me, and deliver it whenever he got a chance. Well, sir, they ain't no percentage in stealin' your own money, is there?"

Now, Mel made his move, a lightning-fast draw that startled Charley, even though his own gun was drawn.

Acrid flame and smoke danced on the cold air, and Mel pitched forward; the old mare nickered nervously at the sound of gunfire.

A moment later, the sheriff's posse came loping up. "Thanks, Charley," Royce said. "I never woulda had him dead to rights like this before."

"What do you mean?" Charley asked.

"I had a hunch it was Wintrub who killed Milt," the lawman said; "but it wasn't till I saw your gun that I knew it wasn't you."

"It'd be a good trick if I could," Charley smiled.

"And if you'da used your own guns here," the Sheriff added, "I'd be plantin' you, not Wintrub."

"He probably was a heavy gambler," Charley said. "I heard in town that he owed a passel of bills."

"Yeah," Sheriff Royce said. "And if we hadn't spirited you outta the jail and gotten word to Mel Wintrub, we'd still be holdin' off the mob in front of the jail."

Together, both men made for their horses. Sheriff Royce looked at Charley, then at the pistol in his left hand, and threw it away. The gun was good for nothing but making noise, and was loaded with blanks; it contained a cross-bar inside the barrel. "Where didja get it—the gun, I mean?"

Charley replied, "Bought it off'n a drummer last year."

"He sure gypped you," the lawman advised.

"Did he?" Charley asked.

It was about that time that Sheriff Royce began looking for things around his house to fix. What with a smart man like Charley Hiss doing the job, there was no fear.

★

Sam Baracol was fond of his niece, Mara, but women had to stay in their place in this world — and their place most certainly was not in a chemical laboratory, helping a man discover the formula for an elixir of sheer delight!

Here's A Fascinating Novelet

POLAR PUNCH

by Boyd Ellanby

don't miss the August **SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY**

WARRANT OF DEATH

Latigo Knight was well-loved by the people here; any warrant a law-officer carried for Knight's arrest was a warrant of death — for the lawman!

by Gordon D. Shirreffs

JORGE BACA whispered hoarsely into Glenn Yarnell's ear, "Can you see him, amigo?"

Glenn shook his head, straining his eyes against the darkness of the New Mexican night. Somewhere in the maze of catclaw and mesquite was Latigo Knight, the man they trailed for fifty miles from Alamogordo onto the Jornado Del Muerto. The outlaw had eyes like a damned cat and seemed to shoot by some unholy instinct. Jorge rubbed his jaw. "It is like hunting the *espectro,* the ghost."

Glenn inched forward and looked over a ledge of naked rock. Cold sweat

soaked his shirt. He and Jorge could take care of twice their number of ordinary bandidos, but Latigo was no ordinary bandido. There was a sudden movement behind Glenn. He turned to see Jorge rising to his feet. A shouted warning was on Glenn's lips when the gun spoke out of the night; Jorge went down silently. Glenn ran to him, ducking low as another slug sang past. He knelt beside his deputy; it was no use. Jorge's eyes stared sightlessly at him. Glenn cursed and dropped behind the ledge.

The San Andres hills were as silent as they had been before, with not even a rustle or squeak from nocturnal animals. Glenn crawled along the ledge and slid silently into a dry wash. Hooves clattered on loose rock farther down the wash. Glenn shrank back as a man rounded a turn in the wash and slogged toward him, looking back over his shoulder. Glenn closed in, his right foot turned on a stone and he went down on one knee in time to go under a vicious sweeping blow of the man's handgun. He came up, butting with his head, and drove the man back on his heels. He swung a hard left hook, sent the stranger off balance, and buffaloed him neatly with his Colt. Hooves clashed on the hard bed of the wash and Glenn dropped beside the unconscious man as three horsemen swept past, not thirty feet away, lashing their mounts. The beating of the hooves died in the distance.

Glenn looked closely at the man he had downed. There was no mistaking Latigo Knight; the lean handsome face with the Mexican dandy mustache; the steeple hat, heavily ornamented with coin silver filigree. Glenn touched the warrant in his coat pocket. He had his man, but he had paid too high a price for Latigo Knight; he snapped his Mattatuck hand irons on the outlaw and picked up Latigo's ornate handgun, a Smith and Wesson. There was almost a feeling of disgust in him as he handled the gun. There were no notches on the ivory-plated butt; Latigo Knight was too proud of the sixgun to mar its appearance, but the outlaw could have cut at least ten notches on it, if all the tales of him were true.

Glenn climbed to the bank of the wash and looked to the east. A faint drumming came to him. Whoever the three mysterious horsemen had been they were heading far away from the wash. Glenn went back to Jorge. Baca had been his partner for three years in the U. S. Marshal's Service. The little New Mexican had tracked Latigo to Alamogordo, notified Glenn and then waited in the town, risking his life, until Glenn had arrived from Lincoln. Jorge would never again sparkle at Santa Fe festivals.

The false dawn lightened the sky as Glenn finished placing rocks on top of Jorge's grave. He wiped the sweat from his face and looked at Latigo, seated on a rock. "Another count against you, Latigo," he said.

Latigo raised his cuffed hands and took a cigarette from his mouth. "Look, Yarnell," he said quietly, "I didn't shoot at you; I already told you that three times."

Glenn nodded. "You're likely to tell me anything."

Latigo shrugged. "Look at my sixgun. It's fully loaded and clean; how the hell could I have shot at you?"

"Where's your saddlegun?"

"Gone with my horse."

"Where's your horse?"

"Those three hombres drove it off; that's how you caught up with me. You think you would have caught Latigo Knight any other way?"

Glenn flushed. "I've caught a *few* outlaws who were as cocky as you are, Knight."

"Look at the sixgun."

Glenn took out the heavy handgun and pressed the button at the rear of the frame. The gun tipped open, ejecting six cartridges to the ground. He looked through the barrel. It was clean; Latigo was right on *that* count at least. It could have been a rifle that

had killed Jorge; yet Glenn was sure, from the report, that it *had* been a six-gun.

"Who were those three men, Latigo?" asked Glenn.

Latigo shrugged. "They trailed me to Alamogordo, as you did. I was tipped off and took out for the Rio Grande. They caught up with me half an hour before you came along. I didn't even know you were after me. What's the charge against me this time?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"That's right!"

GLENN tilted his head to one side and looked at the cocky outlaw. Latigo was a sort of shabby Robin Hood to the people of New Mexico; he had a ten page file on him up at Santa Fe. The governor had given orders he was to be brought in or else there would be a cleanup of the law department in the territory. Glenn had been ordered down from Las Vegas for that very reason. "You mean to deny you murdered Alessandro Madera?" he asked.

Latigo looked up quickly. "Do I *have* to?" He spat. "I had nothing to do with Madera's death, Yarnell; I was in west Texas when he was shot down."

"Chihuahua! You lie as good as you shoot."

Latigo fumbled with his makings and rolled a cigarette. "No *wonder* the governor is raising hell. Alessandro Madera was one of his boys."

Glenn filled his pipe. "Madera was representing the government in an effort to get a clear case against you and half a dozen other owlhooters. We know we had some pertinent facts that might have put a rope around your neck. When he was found the papers were gone. Besides that, we couldn't get any witnesses against you."

Latigo grinned. "Then you'll have to let me go; you have no proof that I killed Madera."

It was Glenn's turn to grin. He tapped his pocket. "This particular warrant charges that you stole a hundred head of steers from the government herd at Fort Stanton. You wounded a soldier in the deal; he recognized you, and was brought up to Santa Fe to be kept under protection until we could build up a case against you. There are two other warrants in Santa Fe, one charging you with participating in the holdup of a government mail carrier at Socorro. We have *two* witnesses to that. Another warrant charges you with inciting a rebellion amongst native New Mexicans at Fort Sumner. These'll serve to hold you in the calabozo until we get proof you killed Madera."

Latigo whistled softly. "You won't get any witnesses to that."

Glenn shrugged. "We have agents at Fort Sumner now questioning the people. We'll dig up *someone* who will talk."

"Maybe. I doubt it, Yarnell."

Glenn got the horses, fixed the landmarks in his mind so that he could find Jorge's grave again, and gave Latigo a boost up onto Jorge's bay. The three strangers puzzled him. Who were they? If Latigo had not killed Jorge, it must have been one of them. Latigo pulled his sombrero lower as the sun tipped the San Andres. "Where are we heading, Yarnell?"

"Santa Fe."

"A long ride. Do you think you'll get me there?"

"Why not?"

"I have many amigos amongst the New Mexicans; they've helped me before."

"They'll have to kill me before they get you loose."

"Maybe they will."

Glenn touched the butt of his Colt. "You'll be dead too, Latigo; there are other forms of justice besides courts of law, hombre."

Glenn wasn't too cocky about getting Latigo to Santa Fe without trouble. Knight had almost a legendary background with the downtrodden na-

tive New Mexicans. He had appeared five years after the war, from where, no one seemed to know. He fought their battles against the Anglos who mistreated them. He could walk into almost any town in old New Mexico, right under the noses of the lawmen, and be protected and hidden by his amigos. His name was a symbol of hope on the lips of the New Mexicans, and many dark-eyed senoritas carried that same name in their hearts. The government wanted to reconcile the native New Mexicans to the American form of life; but with Latigo Knight on the loose, they hadn't been able to make many overtures.

Glenn turned in his saddle and looked back. A thread of dust was drifting off on the morning wind from near Pilot Knob. Mescaleros still raided occasionally out on the Jornado, only to race back to their reservation and swear up and down they had never left it. Roving bands of bandidos still carried on the trade they had pursued when New Mexico had been a battleground between Federal and Confederate. It was well over one hundred and fifty miles to Santa Fe where Yarnell was supposed to deliver his prisoner. He'd have to be damned careful when he went into towns for supplies, for if the inhabitants knew he had Latigo Knight in his hands they would stir up trouble. They had done it before on his behalf.

The dust hung low all day behind the two men as they pushed on north with the Sierra Oscuro looming up from a plum-colored haze to the east. Glenn debated to himself whether he should cut to the west and follow the valley of the Rio Grande north toward Santa Fe. He decided against it; Latigo had too many amigos in the river towns. Glenn called a halt that night and made camp in a canyon that led into the Sierra Oscuro. His water was low and there had been little time to get supplies in Alamogordo. He didn't look forward to stopping in some town for supplies.

GLENN STARTED the day's journey two hours before dawn. By the time the sun was on the wane they had hit a rutted track such as passed for roads in many parts of the territory. They rounded a turn in the road between low hills and saw a goat tender watching them from a slope. He waved a hand as they drew rein. "How far is the next town, friend?" called Glenn.

The man pointed north and spoke in Spanish. "Piedra. But a few miles, senor." He looked closely at Latigo and then started down the slope. "Amigo!" he called. He slid to a stop as Latigo held up his cuffed hands. His dark eyes half closed as he looked at Glenn. "Where are you taking him?" he asked.

"Santa Fe," said Glenn quietly.

The man scowled. Suddenly he turned and went up the hill to vanish in an arroyo. Latigo grinned. Glenn eyed the outlaw. "Friend of yours?" he asked.

"He knows me."

Glenn touched his dun with his spurs. No use in hiding Knight now. By the time they reached Piedra the news would be about.

Piedra nestled amongst the dun hills. The houses were built of adobe and fieldstone, many of them painted in faded pink and blue with scarlet *ristras* of dried chiles flaunting their color against the walls. The sun sparkled on crosses of bright stones inlaid in the walls of the church. Frijole thrashers halted their horses as Glenn and Latigo rode past the first houses. Women looked over waist-high blue doors, eyeing the two gringos. An old man looked up from in front of the crumbling *torreon* and spat as he eyed Glenn. On the flat housetops, amongst the corn, hay and pumpkins drying in the sun were other women and children, silently eyeing the man who was their champion. Younger women, their faces stained with red alegria, or flour paste, to protect their skins from the hot sun, scurried for shelter with a swish of voluminous skirts. Carrion-

eating dogs scattered from in front of the two horses. A monte dealer put his cards down on the blanket which served as a place to play. The players squatted beside him. There was no love in their eyes for Glenn.

Glenn swung down and gave Latigo a hand to the ground. "Stay here," he said quietly; "you can't get those cuffs off without the key. If you make a break for it I'll kill you."

Latigo shrugged. "I believe you."

Glenn went into a dark store. The merchant shuffed out and waited on him silently. Glenn waited until his sack was full and then paid the man. There was a low murmur of voices outside. When he left the store he saw a crowd standing back from the two horses and the grinning outlaw. Men with straw sombreros and bright serapes; filthy cotton shirts and trousers. Women with chemises, rebozos and short swinging skirts. Farther up the street was a priest, walking swiftly toward the crowd. A tall New Mexican fondled an ancient, rust-pitted *escopeta*. The sun flashed on knives held in brown hands. The priest spoke quietly to the men and the knives vanished but the tall man with the *escopeta* merely stepped back and eyed Glenn sullenly.

The priest stopped in front of Glenn. "You will not be here long?" he asked.

"Long enough to get a new shoe on my horse."

The priest glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Is it necessary? These children of mine do not like you, my son."

Glenn shrugged. "Because of this killer?"

The priest nodded. "I have spoken against this man many times, but they idolize him; would that they idolized me as much. Can you not go on?"

"My horse will go lame if I don't get him shoed."

"As you will then. There is a little law here. The *alcalde* is in Albuquerque, but even he would not do anything to help you if they are aroused."

Half a dozen dusty burros, laden heavily with faggots, trotted into the plaza. The priest looked at the man who drove them. "There is Bartolome Amadeo, the muleteer. He is a trouble-maker, senor. I had hoped he would not be back until this evening; I can do nothing with *that* man."

Glenn touched the butt of his Colt. "There won't be any trouble if they keep away from us."

"Yes. *If* they keep away from you."

The muleteer halted his dusty charges and swaggered over to the crowd. His dark eyes studied Glenn. He was a short, thick-bodied man with big arms. A pistol was thrust into his sash beside a knife. He spoke quietly to some of the men and they left the crowd. Glenn took the reins of the horses and led them toward the blacksmith's shop. The crowd watched him and Latigo. The blacksmith silently took the dun into his shop. "I can use a drink," said Latigo; "there's a cantina next door."

"You'll do without it," said Glenn.

LATIGO stepped back. Five men stood not far from the outlaw. Hands were on knives and pistols. "I'm having a drink," he said quietly, "with some of my friends; you aiming to stop me?"

For a moment Glenn almost drew and then he thought better of it. It would only lead to gun and knife play. "I won't make a break," said Latigo; "my word on that."

"Your word is worth a lot to me," said Glenn.

Latigo flushed. "Take it or leave it; I'm having a drink." The outlaw walked toward the cantina. Glenn followed him pushing his way past the men. They entered the dim tavern and walked to the zinc-topped bar. Men were seated at the tables. A cold feeling crept over Glenn. There wasn't a friendly, or neutral, man in the place. Latigo called for *aquardiente* and took the bottle to a table. "Sit down, Yar-

nell," he said with a smile; "might as well enjoy your drink."

"I wish to hell I had kept on without supplies and with a lame cayuse," said Glenn as he sat down with his back against the wall.

"You wouldn't get far; all I have to do is call out and I'll be free as a bird."

"You'll be as dead as a doornail if you do."

"Yarnell, I believe you *would* kill me and then try to fight your way out of town. Let's have a drink; I want to talk with you about something. Something that might make you do a little thinking along the right lines."

Glenn filled the glasses and shoved the bottle back. "Start talking," he said; "I've got a *little* time."

"This is a very old country hereabouts, Yarnell; these people are not far removed from peonage. It is still very much like one of the older states of your country in colonial days."

Glenn refilled their glasses, eyeing the strange man who sat across from him. He had said, *"Your country,"* in referring to the United States. Outwardly he was like many another border American, accepting as his own those customs of Mexico that he liked; the mustache, sombrero, and those words of the language which fitted certain actions or things better than the English language did. Yet they were all intensely Americans.

"Put yourself in the place of one of these people. They have lived for years under the old colonial system, in a quiet backward life. Suddenly the conqueror comes. The bustling, fighting *gringos*. Everything is swept away and even the land is lost to old Mexico. Then the *gringos* fight amongst each other and the New Mexicans are practically forced to take part in a fight in which most of them have no interest. When the war is over they get little or nothing from the victory; they see big ranchers sweep away their little holdings. They see sharp American businessmen take the mass of profits and shove their little business into ruin."

Glenn eyed the silent men in the smoky room. They were hanging on to Latigo's words with intense concentration. They treated the outlaw with great respect. *Why?* He was only fomenting trouble amongst them. Glenn waved a hand. "All this is true, Knight, but it is progress. Many Americans have been trying to help the New Mexicans, but not in the way you have gone about it. Look at you now: a prisoner, facing charges of rustling, robbery and murder. You've done nothing but create more trouble. Don't try to cover up your crimes by playing the part of a champion of the people of New Mexico!"

Latigo flushed. "The conqueror speaks."

Glenn nodded. "Nothing you can say will clear off the charges of murdering Alessandro Madera."

Knight leaned forward. "I was leading up to that, Yarnell. I did *not* kill Alessandro Madera, but I think I know who did. Those three men who were trailing me when you caught up with me had something to do with it."

Glenn grinned. "Keep talking; you're still going to Santa Fe."

"There are other men who thrive on trouble in this territory. Men who have been capitalizing on my leadership of these people; many of the crimes charged against me were actually perpetrated by those men."

Glenn studied the outlaw. He spoke like an educated man. There was a certain air of gentility about him which now and then gained domination over the swaggering airs of the outlaw. Who was he? The black sheep of some wealthy family? An opportunist? A Mexican agent? Glenn stood up. "We've wasted enough time."

LATIGO stood up. Glenn turned toward the door. The way was barred by the men who had been listening to Latigo Knight. The lamplight shone dully on drawn blades and the brass

trim of pistols. Bartolome Amadeo stood closest to Glenn. A heavy-bladed knife lay across the wide palm of his right hand. "Get out of the way," said Glenn quietly. Amadeo looked at Latigo. There was a ray of hope in Latigo's eyes. Glenn felt cold sweat work down his sides. He had fought his way out of messes before, but none of them would compare to this if shooting started. He glanced at Latigo. "You tell your friends to get out of the way," he said quietly; "my first shot is for you, Knight, if they start anything."

For a moment their eyes seemed to clash together. "Give me the key for these bracelets, Yarnell; I'll see that you get out of Piedra without trouble."

"No. Where are all your arguments now? A few minutes ago you were claiming that you wanted to *help* these people; now you want them to keep a law officer from performing his sworn duty. A little inconsistent, isn't it?"

Latigo glanced at Amadeo. "Bartolome can sink that knife up to the hilt in you before you can draw, Yarnell. *Give me the key!*"

"No!"

Latigo shrugged. He looked at his friends. "Out of the way, amigos; let us through. The time has not come yet."

The men muttered amongst themselves as they stepped back. Glenn led the way into the dark street. He glanced back at the outlaw. Latigo had been right; Glenn would have never left that cantina alive if Latigo had willed against it. Still, perhaps the outlaw didn't want to implicate his friends in the death of a law officer. Beyond Piedra there were many dark mountain trails and canyons where a man could be drygulched and his body never found. More than ever Glenn wished little Jorge Baca was at his side. They had been a good team.

The dun was not ready. The blacksmith made sullen excuses until Latigo spoke quietly to him and then he set to work. Glenn stood at the door of the shop and watched the people who had gathered out in the street. Some of them spoke in low voices and several times he heard the title *don,* or *padrone* used in referring to Latigo Knight.

A dull moon had swung up over the Galinas Mountains when the dun was ready. "You plan to go on?" asked Latigo quietly of Glenn.

Glenn nodded. "If you think I'm staying here tonight to get a knife in my ribs you're loco."

Latigo looked to the north. "I have been told that three strange horsemen have been seen near the town."

"Amigos of yours?"

"No. Nor of yours. Stay here, tonight Yarnell; I swear you'll be safe."

Glenn laughed. "We're going on. I don't give a damn if the whole country is full of bandidos."

Latigo eyed him. "You're either the bravest man I've ever met, or the most foolish; I'll know before long."

They swung up on their horses. Dark eyes flashed hate at Glenn as he rode to the north. He had drawn his Henry rifle from its scabbard and carried it across his thighs. With that, his Colt, and Latigo's ornate pistol he could give a good account of himself. There was no trouble, but as they rode up a rise Glenn was sure he saw half a dozen mounted men gather at the edge of the town led by the muleteer, Bartolome Amadeo. He spurred the dun on into the shadows of the canyon.

A COLD wind swept down the canyon as they rode higher amongst the scrub trees. There was a feeling of tension in the gorge. Time and time again Glenn looked back down the winding trail, half expecting to see horsemen closing in on them. But the trail was deserted. They stopped to breathe the horses as the moon reached its zenith. Latigo accepted a cigarette from Glenn. He puffed at it and then took it from his lips to listen

attentively. Glenn eyed the outlaw. "What's wrong, Latigo?"

Latigo turned. "There's someone up ahead of us."

Glenn listened. He heard nothing. The wind moaned through the trees. The moon drifted behind ragged clouds. Glenn walked up the trail, carrying his rifle. He reached an open area just as the moon came out again. Something clicked amongst the brush to one side. He turned quickly. As he did so something moved on the other side of the clearing. Suddenly three men stood up, holding pistols. "All right, marshal," one of them said quietly, "drop that rifle."

Glenn stepped back. They were not men from Piedra. Two of them were Americans, the third was obviously a Mexican, a tough-looking border type. "Who are you?" he asked.

"We want Latigo Knight," said the tallest man.

"Why?"

"He wants to know why, Borke." the tall man said to the other American. He laughed.

Borke stepped forward. "Get rid of that rifle, marshal," he said; "now!"

Glenn dropped the Henry rifle. As he raised his hands he cleared his Colt from its holster and fired. The slug rapped into the tall man's left arm. He cursed and fired his pistol. Glenn dived for cover, rolling down an incline to end up with a smash against a rock as slugs sang over his head. He heard Latigo curse. The moon drifted behind clouds again. Boots clashed on rock and bullets whispered past him. He looked back. He was trapped. He couldn't get back down the trail without getting killed or wounded. He snapped a shot into the brush and was rewarded with a curse. A slug whipped through his hat. He crouched low and emptied his Colt. As he rolled over to draw the Smith and Wesson a slug smashed into his left forearm. He grunted and became sickened with the pain. He rolled over behind a larger rock. Blood dripped from his fingers. He tried to raise the Smith and Wesson but his right hand shook so much he dropped it. Boots clattered on the rocks. "I winged him, Borke!" the tall man called.

"Work around to the left, Vidal! Carlos! Come with me!" called Borke. "Kill the bustard!"

Glenn trembled with pain. Somebody moved behind him. He turned to see Latigo Knight drop from a rock ledge. The outlaw gripped Glenn by the shoulder and took the handcuff key from Glenn's pocket. He fumbled with the key and then unsnapped the lock. He rubbed his wrists and grinned. Glenn tried to raise the ornate sixgun but Latigo was too fast. He gripped the weapon and tore it from Glenn's weakened hand. He cocked it and looked down at Glenn. "Shoot, you polecat!" said Glenn.

"I will," said Latigo. He whirled as Borke jumped from behind a rock. The Smith and Wesson flashed. Borke screamed as the big .44 ripped a hole in his gut. He did an awkward stumbling dance and went down on his knees in front of the Mexican. Carlos hurdled the wounded man and raised his Colt. It flamed and Latigo dived to one side, firing his gun from a sideways position. Carlos whirled about only to catch another slug in his back. He went down over Borke. There was a clash of boots. Vidal closed in on Latigo, smashing the handgun out of the outlaw's hand with a sweep of his Colt. Latigo staggered the tall man with a left.

Vidal's Colt roared; the slug creased the outlaw. He went down, tried to get up and then sank down again. Vidal cocked his Colt. He turned his back on Glenn. Glenn hooked a boot toe about the tall man's ankle and booted him in the rump. Vidal went down over Latigo. Glenn got to his feet as Vidal fired from the ground. The bullet sang thinly past Glenn's head. He kicked Vidal on the jaw and dropped atop him as he went down again, scrabbling for the Colt. Vidal kneed Glenn in the groin

and threw him off. Glenn rolled over and came up fast, butting the tall man in the gut. The air went out of him with a rush and a vicious kick knocked him out. Glenn swayed, weakened from the loss of blood, and then passed out, smashing his head against a rock.

THE SOFT strumming of a guitar penetrated the veil of darkness about Glenn. He opened his eyes. He lay on a pile of sheepskins in a large low room. Lamplight danced on white plastered walls. Three men were seated at a table with a bottle before them. Another man sat on a saddle, softly singing a verso about Latigo, the hero of New Mexico. Bartolome Amadeo filled the glasses— "What will you do now, Don Knight?" he asked.

Latigo Knight lit a cigarette. "I do not know."

"Vidal admitted that he and two other bandidos killed Alessandra Madre and had the blame fixed on you; we will all bear witness to that."

"True. But the marshal did not hear him say so."

Bartolome glanced at Glenn. "We can get rid of him, Don Knight."

"No! It would not help us any; we cannot antagonize the American government any more than we have."

The third man rubbed his jaw. "What will you do then?"

Latigo stood up and came to the side of the bed. He looked down at Glenn. "He is a brave man," he said, "and a just one. Perhaps he will listen to us."

Glenn sat up, wincing as his bandaged arm felt the strain. His head ached. "Talk," he said; "you saved my life, Latigo."

Latigo sat down beside Glenn. "Those three men were bandidos. Many of the crimes for which I was blamed were actually done by them; they killed Alessandro Madera and had the blame placed against me."

"I believe you."

"They also killed your friend, the marshal, as I told you."

"I believe that also. But who are you? What were you trying to do?"

Latigo waved a hand. "My people lived in this land since the time of the *conquistadores*. My father was an *Anglo*, such as you, a man who came here with Kearney during the occupation. My mother was the last of my line, a woman of great wealth here and in Old Mexico. I was sent to Mexico to study when the Civil War started. When Juarez won his fight I found myself without land in Mexico, for I fought with Maximilian's troops. I fled Mexico only to find that my people here in New Mexico were as downtrodden as the peons in Old Mexico. My lands had been confiscated, for a story had started that I had fought with the Confederacy. I was angry; I became a champion of my people, hoping we could throw off the yoke of the Americans."

"You haven't a chance."

Latigo nodded. "Perhaps. But I will not give up."

"What happens to me now?"

"You will be freed."

"And you?"

Latigo shrugged. "I will go on fighting."

GLENN EYED the man. "Have you ever thought of trying to clear yourself so that you could go back to your lands? You could do more for your people that way."

"No!" said Bartolome. He stood up. "What have the *gringos* done for us? We are worse off than we were before."

Latigo held out a hand. "If I do go to Santa Fe to clear myself, Yarnell, what chance do I have?"

Glenn stood up. "The governor is anxious to stop trouble amongst your

people. I can testify that Madera was killed by Borke, Vidal and Carlos, and that you were blamed."

Latigo rubbed his jaw. "And the other charges?"

"They *might* be quashed, *if* you agree to do your best to help your people become Americans."

Latigo went to the window and looked out on a moonlit plaza. "I've felt for a long time that we couldn't win. My people have no idea how powerful the United States is; if I got my lands back I am sure I could help my people."

"Will you take the chance?" asked Glenn.

Latigo turned. "Why not? I can fight better against men like those three bandidos."

"I do not trust the *gringos*," said Bartolome.

Latigo shook his head. "We have a strong friend in Senor Yarnell."

Glenn came close to the young New Mexican. "I can accept the U. S. Marshal's post in your part of the country; I'll do all I can to help you."

Latigo gripped Glenn's hand. "I'll go; I trust you."

Bartolome filled the glasses as the guitarist composed a new *verso* about Latigo and his *companero*, the Americano. Glenn downed his drink. Maybe Jorge Baca had not died in vain. With the help of Latigo Knight, Glenn could bring law and order to lawless New Mexico. The Mexican's death-warrant would become a warrant of life for the people of New Mexico.

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POWDERSMOKE REVENGE

Lance Carter didn't like sheep any better than the other cattlemen around Canyon City. But old Carter had brought sheep in — and even the cowmen's riders agreed that a man ought to side his kinfolks.

by William F. Schwartz

LANCE CARTER'S lean, sun-browned face was creased with worry as he headed his grulla across the rolling Montana prairie toward Canyon City. The predicament he was in, he was reminding himself grimly, was entirely his own fault. He should never have written that letter home.

Lance rode along easily on the loping, long-limbed gelding. Carter was tall and thin, wide at the shoulders and narrow at the hips. His hair, underneath a high-crowned gray Stetson, was tawny yellow; his eyes, hard now, were a stark blue. He was thirty years old and his garb was the gray flannel shirt and blue denims of a man who had punched cattle for many years. Only Lance Carter no longer worked with cattle.

His job, until a few months back, was ramrod for the Slash X spread. By unstinting toil he had worked his way up to that position from a twenty dollar a month plus grub cowpoke. He had even saved money to buy some beef of his own and had envisioned himself, sometime in the future, as a ranch owner.

But all that now seemed behind him. What his future held now, he could

hardly even guess; his former friends here in Stillwater Valley, he realized, now considered him a pariah, a traitor, an outcast.

And it was all his own fault. He should never have written that letter.

Lance Carter's folks; his father, John Carter, and his brothers, Ralph and Seth, were still in Idaho when Lance wrote them that letter. In the letter he had dwelt at length on the lush grasslands of Montana, where the grass was higher than a cow's belly in the flush of summer.

And that letter had lured Lance's folks to Montana. And, with them, the Carters had brought those four-footed foragers that the cattlemen loathed—*sheep!*

Sheep! Lance knew, inside, that he himself had just cause to hate them, for the coming of the woolies had changed his life. Before, he had been respected by the cowpokes and cattle-owners of Stillwater Valley; now, he was the object of sneers and contempt.

For he had made his choice. Blood was thicker than water, and duty to his family forced Lance to side with his father and his brothers when the inevitable occured—the range war that was started by the cattlemen to drive the Carters from the Valley.

Lance had no idea when he wrote the letter that his family would bring in sheep, and there were times when he cursed the wooly little monsters that had ruined his life. But the range war had drawn him closer to his family.

At first, only a few sheep at a time —those that had strayed from the main flock—were found slaughtered by bullets or with their throats cut. But then the intensity of the killings had increased; one night there was a raid on the Carter camp and the next morning dead wool covered the green of the prairie.

Lance had been a cattle-lover almost since boyhood; he well understood the plight of the ranchers once the sheep had a stronghold. There were times when he yearned to persuade his father to abandon this mad project of forcing sheep onto ranges where formerly only cattle grazed. But his father, Lance knew, was headstrong. The killing of his sheep did not discourage John Carter; instead, it merely enraged him, made him more determined to stay here in Stillwater Valley.

"I'll not be run out of here!" Carter had told his sons, his blue eyes bristling with hatred for the cattlemen. "I have as much right here as they do. The government owns the land—not those killers."

A CERTAIN tenseness gripped Lance as he neared Canyon City. This was his first trip to the tiny cow-town since he had cast his lot, once and forever, with his sheepherding family; and, though he felt nothing he could call fear, he dreaded what might be in store for him there.

But Ralph was in trouble; and Ralph, he knew, had been brought here to Canyon City. Some Slash X cattle had been found killed on the open range—the same method that had been employed to slaughter the Carter sheep. And the blame had been placed on his brother, Ralph.

Slash X men had ridden up to the Carter camp the day before. With them was Marshal Dave Moran. Guns had been trained on John Carter and his sixteen-year-old son, Seth, while Ralph, who was twenty-two, was removed, forcibly. Lance was away when the raid took place. It was only this morning, when he had returned, that he learned what had happened to his brother.

"I heard them say," John Carter told Lance, "that they were takin' Ralph to Bartlet's Place for a trial. Fine trial he'll get from them killers."

So it was Bartlet's Place that Lance sought out when he reached Canyon City; it being the largest building in the cowtown. It was a saloon and a gambling hall. But it was also used as a courtroom by Judge Nick Bartlet, owner of the saloon, who had been dispensing so-called frontier justice there

for years. Bartlet was known as a "hangin' judge," Lance knew that Bartlet hated all sheepherders.

Lance Carter tried hard to hold his emotions in check as he hitched his grulla to the rack in front of Bartlet's; but in spite of himself, a feeling of uneasiness gripped him. He was going into the armed camp of his enemies. he knew, and hoped he would not be too late.

Warily, Lance's eyes probed the almost deserted main street of Canyon City as he slapped the trail dust from his shirt and denims. He made certain his .45 was loose in the holster he wore tied with a thong to his right thigh. Then he stepped across the planked sidewalk and headed for Bartlet's.

It was as though an orchestra leader had rapped his baton. A second before Lance entered, Bartlet's was filled with the noise of tinny music from a piano and the voices of half-drunken men as they argued, half-heartedly, over cards and drinks. But the instant Lance's boots hit the sawdust inside and they saw his face, all noise ceased abruptly and there was sudden, electric-tinged silence.

At first, the silence was almost material in density, and Lance felt it like an affront. But he ignored the hostile stares that were shot at him and stepped toward the bar.

Judge Bartlet himself was tending bar. The Judge was a chunky man with ponderous shoulders and a potbelly. His thinning black hair was curled into a bartender's roach and his flabby cheeks had the sickly paleness of one who spent too much time indoors.

Bartlet was washing glasses when Lance entered. Now he wiped thick, water-reddened hands on a soiled apron and came up to face Lance from behind the bar. "Where is he?" Lance asked Bartlet, fighting to keep his voice calm. "My brother."

Bartlet's yellow, jaundiced eyes swept the others in the room before he answered, as though he were already seeking help in case trouble developed. "Your brother?" Bartlet began, tonelessly, without moving a muscle of his flabby face except thick, bloodless lips. "Your brother's dead. His body's over at the undertaking parlor."

FOR SECONDS, Lance could do nothing but stand stock-still while waves of sudden horror flooded through him. To control himself, he seized the oak bar with his left hand, gripped it savagely, until his knuckles showed white and bloodless. Then his right hand dropped to his .45.

"You killer!" Lance rasped. He was ready to draw, to shoot down this fat pig who stood before him. "You hanged my brother?"

Bartlet sucked in his breath. Then he backed away from Lance's wrath. "I didn't!" Bartlet protested. "I had nuthin' to do with it. He wasn't up before me on trial; I didn't order him to be hanged!"

"Then what happened?" Lance demanded. "What happened to my brother?"

"I reckon," a voice spoke quietly from behind Lance, "that it's my duty to tell what happened."

Lance whirled. Marshal Dave Moran stood there, a tall, skinny man with a white walrus mustache and a leathery-brown face seamed with wrinkles. Moran wore an unpolished badge on an opened vest and twin walnut-handled .44s on his splindle shanks.

Moran, Lance knew, was deadly with a six-shooter. But in his present mood, Lance was ready to exchange gunfire with anybody—no matter how good they were.

"Then tell me!" Lance ordered. "Tell me what happened to my brother!"

"It was the vigilantes," the lawman said.

"The vigilantes!"

"Yes, Carter, the vigilantes; they did it last night. They overpowered Marks, my deputy, hauled your brother out of the lockup, strung him up on that cottonwood on the edge of town."

"And where were you, Marshal," Lance demanded, his fingers still clawing above his .45, "when all this happened?"

Lance watched bitterness creep into Moran's washed-out blue eyes. The marshal had only a few molars left in his nearly toothless mouth; but he was grinding them together in impatience. "I'll just say I wasn't here," the marshal said, "and let it go at that. I had no part in it—believe me!"

And, somehow, in spite of the hatred Lance Carter was feeling for all humanity, he believed Moran was telling the truth. Anyway, Moran was reputed to be a man whose word could be trusted.

"My advice to you, Carter," the marshal added, his gray eyes stern, "is to get out of here. Take your brother's body with you—but get out of Canyon City."

"And what if I don't?"

"You will!" Moran told him almost solemnly, his eyes now on the hand that Lance held close to his .45. "You will, Carter."

But Lance shook his head. "I ain't goin', Marshal. I tell you, I ain't goin'."

Then Lance stepped back. He wanted to have room in case Moran went for his .44s. The marshal was supposed to be greased lightning with a six-shooter. Well, he'd soon find out.

But his situation was helpless, Lance saw at once. Already the other men in the saloon were backing up the marshal. Chairs scraped as the card players left the tables and waited, warily. The drinkers at the bar left their whiskeys and moved forward. Soon Lance found himself alone in a hostile circle of men whose hands were poised above their guns. And Judge Bartlet, Lance noticed out of the corner of his eye, had his hands below the bar. And Lance knew the saloon-keeper always had a loaded sawed-off shotgun handy there.

Lance watched, dully, as the others closed in on him. He knew all these men. Most of them were Slash X riders. Brick Dalton was there, a flame-haired cowpoke who had replaced him as ramrod when he quit the Slash X. And old Abe Pflueger was there; and Mehler; and Brennan; and Jackson. Once, some of them had been his close friends. Now they looked ready to gun him to death. That's what the coming of the sheep had done to him, Lance mused bitterly.

Abe Pflueger was first to talk to Lance. Abe was an ancient gray-haired, bow-legged wrangler who had been at Slash X long before Lance himself had found employment there. Pflueger was in late sixties, at least.

"Lance, we had peace here in Stillwater Valley before your family came. And we'll have peace again—after they go. We ain't got no quarrel with you, Lance; leastwise, we didn't have none before your family brought in them woolies. But you know, as well as us, that there ain't no place for sheep here. This is cattle country. Sure, the Slash X had its squabbles with other outfits—over water holes and such. But they've been ended now—for years. But your family—and them woolies—are a new sore spot. It's them or us. You could have stuck with us, but you chose your family. Me, I ain't blamin' yuh; a man should stick up for his own kin-folk. But get them outta here—before—before—"

Pflueger stopped suddenly, as if he realized, what a long speech he had made, probably the longest in his life. He eyed the other Slash X cowpokes sheepishly. Lance figured that the whiskey old Abe had drunk had made him more eloquent. The whole bunch, Lance saw, had been drinking—hard. He could see it in their flushed faces, their glassy eyes. Probably drinking to ease their consciences for what had happened the night before.

BRICK DALTON had been drinking, too, probably harder than the rest. At least, it looked like the whiskey was taking more effect on him. Lance could smell the whiskey on Dalton's breath as he moved in close,

thrust out a square-jawed chin that was deeply cleft.

"Yeh," Dalton said, a sneer spreading across his freckled face. "Get out of here, Carter, and take your whole family with yuh—or maybe they'll be more hangin's."

That was too much. Lance could take no more. There never had been any love lost between him and the flame-haired puncher. For years, Lance had sensed that Dalton had envied him his job as foreman at the Slash X. So Lance reached for his .45; even with death staring him in the face. There were at least ten men here to oppose him. But Lance reached for his gun. He'd get Dalton, at least, he promised himself, before he himself was blasted down in a blaze of six-shooters.

But Moran stepped quickly in front of Lance. A gnarled hand shot out and the marshal grabbed Lance's gun hand, forcing it away from the .45 Lance carried on his thigh.

"That's enough!" Moran barked. "There's been too much trouble here already." Then he wheeled on Dalton. "And you—shut up! I ain't forgettin' that hangin' last night. Don't think I am. Vigilante Committee or not—it was still a mob takin' the law into its own hands. I was elected here to keep the law. And I'll keep it. That hangin' wasn't legal. And there won't be no more like it. That, I promise you." Then the marshal turned to Lance again. "Let's get out of here, Carter," he suggested. "There's nuthin' but trouble for you here."

"But—" Lance began.

But it was no use. The marshal had him by the arm and was breaking a hole through the ring of men who had encircled Lance.

Lance walked out by the marshal's side. Lance felt sick inside, nauseated. This exit from Bartlet's, his inner voice was taunting him, was the departure of a whipped hound dog with its tail between its legs. He should have stayed; should have fought it out—even though it meant almost instant death. Walking out like this, meekly, behind the marshal, would brand him forever as a coward in the eyes of all men.

But what would happen to Dad, to Seth, if he, too, died now? They needed him now more than ever, for protection. And there would no longer be any mental debates about whose side he should be on—his family's or the cattlemen's. Ralph's death, the cattlemen's hatred for him—had ended all indecision. He would fight with his family—to the bitter end. Maybe, he would eventually be gunned down in this quarrel between Slash X and his family. But he would go down fighting—some place where he had a chance; not in Bartlet's, when it was filled with his enemies.

But, suddenly, when Lance and the lawman reached the planked sidewalk, something else happened. Insult was added to injury to worsen the situation. From inside the saloon came a mocking voice. Somebody was *baaing* like an injured sheep.

"Baa! Baa!" the voice taunted.

And Lance was beside himself with rage. He began to stride, angrily, toward the batwings again. His hand was yanking his .45 from its leather as he went.

But then he felt a gun in his ribs. Moran had a .44 out and was pressing it into Lance's side.

"Enough of that!" the Marshal ordered. "Put that hoglaig back. I said: 'no trouble!' And I meant it!"

Lance groaned inside. What could he do? Moran had the drop on him.

"But a man can stand just so much!" Lance protested to the lawman. "Then he has to fight—whether he dies or not!"

"And you'd die," Moran told him. The marshal's eyes, now, Lance saw, had no anger in them; only sympathy. "If you went in there—alone. Can't you see, Carter? Best thing now—for the time bein'—is to leave things the way they are. Anyway, I can't let you go in there to shoot it out. I'm still the law here. And my job is to prevent killin's."

Lance was grateful—in a way—for

Moran's consideration. But he couldn't control the anger that had festered within him. "But what about Ralph?" Lance asked as he and Moran started down the planks once more. "They killed my brother, Marshal. And where were you? Why didn't you prevent it?"

Moran gritted his teeth again. "I told you I was away, Carter."

"But why did you arrest Ralph in the first place? Why did you lock him up where they could get at him? My brother didn't shoot those cattle; I'm sure he didn't. But, even if he did, he was only payin' them back with their own coin. The cattlemen think nuthin' of killin' sheep. I don't see why you arrested Ralph."

THE LAWMAN'S lips tightened into a straight line. Impatience flooded his eyes.

"I arrested your brother," Moran explained, "because a warrant had been issued by Judge Bartlet on the oath of Dalton, foreman for the Slash X. The warrant charged your brother with killin' those cattle. I had to make the arrest when the warrant was issued; that's my sworn duty. Everything about the arrest was legal-like. Look, Carter, I'm sorry your brother's dead. I didn't know what was goin' to happen, or I'd never left Canyon City after we locked your brother up. Judge Bartlet promised there'd be no trial until I said so. If there had been a trial, it would have been a fair one; I'd have seen to that. Dalton would have to prove your brother killed those cattle."

Lance scoffed, "A fair trial, Marshal? How would Ralph get a fair trial? Who could have been on the jury in this county but cattlemen? How would Ralph get a fair trial?"

At that, the marshal wheeled. The lawman was grinding his teeth together again. His eyes were stony hard. "I'll let you in on a secret, Carter," Moran said. "I intended to keep it quiet, but what's the use now? The reason I was out of town last night was because I went to Colter. Colter, in case you might have forgotten, has a telegraph line; Canyon City don't. I wired Helena about your brother. I wanted to get him a change of venue; have the trial in another county; maybe up in the minin' district. That way, I figured your brother would have a fair trial."

Lance stared at the lawman. He hadn't expected anything like that. But he was remembering too, Moran's reputation for fairness.

"Thanks, Marshal," he said, limply. "I appreciate what yuh tried to do." But he still felt bitter inside. Ralph was dead. Nothing could change that.

Then the marshal asked a question. "You sure your brother didn't kill those cattle?"

"Yes, Marshal; I'm sure. He wanted to—after all those sheep were killed the night the cattlemen raided our camp. But I talked him out of it."

The marshal's eyes grew hard again. "How many sheep were killed—the night of the raid, I mean?"

"At least a hundred."

"And you never told me. I never knew nuthin' about that raid."

"I figured," Lance said, "that it would do no good. The cattlemen are too powerful here."

"But you should have told me, Carter. You should have come in; should have swore out a warrant for whoever you figured killed all them woolies."

Lance halted in his tracks. "It's not too late now, Marshal, is it—to swear out a warrant?"

"No," the lawman admitted. "It's not."

"Then I'll swear out a warrant, Marshal; I'll swear out a warrant for Brick Dalton and the Slash X outfit. I'm sure they're the ones that killed them off."

"But you'll have to prove it, Carter," the lawman reminded, "when it comes to trial."

"Don't worry!" Lance told him. "I'll prove it." But, inside, he wondered how.

Then he thought of something. He whispered with Moran, pleaded with Moran, explained his plan.

"Okay," Moran said, finally. "I'll

take a chance. That Slash X outfit is gettin' too high and mighty lately. Somebody got to take them down a peg, and that somebody has to be me. I might as well have the showdown now. There'll be no more unlegal hangin's if I can help it."

LANCE CARTER followed Marshal Moran back into Bartlet's Place. Once more, Lance felt eyes dig into him as he trailed the lawman up to the bar. Dalton, Lance saw, was standing beside a card table, watching a game of stud that had halted suddenly. A half empty glass of whiskey was in Dalton's hand. A sneer spread across Dalton's face when he saw Lance once more.

"Carter here," Moran announced to Judge Bartlet, without preliminaries, "wants to swear out a warrant."

Bartlet's yellow eyes narrowed to slits of suspicion.

"What kind of warrant, Marshal?"

"A warrant chargin' the Slash X riders with killin' his father's sheep."

The shape of Bartlet's eyes changed suddenly. They grew round with surprise. "I don't get it, Marshal," Bartlet began. He started to say more, but didn't—loud, roaring laughter echoed through the barroom.

The laughter came from Dalton. His mouth was open wide. His head was thrown back and he was roaring with derisive glee. "You're joshin'!" Dalton guffawed. "Marshal, you wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" Moran said. The marshal's eyes, unlike Dalton's, Lance saw, had no mirth in them. The lawman's washed-out gray eyes were stony hard. "And after this warrant is sworn to," Moran said, "I'm arrestin' you, Dalton, as the first one."

The laughter died on Dalton's lips. His expression changed; he sneered, then scowled. Dalton's eyes, Lance saw, were cloudy with whiskey. Apparently, he had been punishing the bottle very heavy. "Don't be an ass, Marshal!" Dalton rasped. It was mostly the whiskey, Lance realized, that was doing the talking now. "How you figure you'd ever serve a warrant—*on me?*"

"I'll serve it all right," Moran said, quietly. Then to Bartlet who was hesitating, a frown on his flabby face. "Get busy, Judge. I want that warrant—now!"

Dalton cursed. He started forward. His legs were moving awkwardly, like he had trouble controlling them. "You'll do nuthin' of the kind, Judge," Dalton said, thickly. "What if I did kill a few blasted sheep? Whose side are you on, anyway, Marshal? The cattlemen's, or these sons of sheepherders?"

"I'm on nobody's side," Moran said. "I'm the law here; my job is to see that justice is done."

A sneer spread anew across Dalton's freckled face. "Well, we don't need your kind of justice, Moran." He looked around to his cowpokes for support. "Do we, boys? We got our own kind of justice, ain't we, boys?"

"Shut up!" Moran barked. Lance could see the lawman's patience was exhausted. "Shut up, Dalton! You're drunk!"

Dalton moved forward. His eyes, glazed though they were from drink, had a certain deadliness in them.

"Drunk—am I?" Dalton shouted. "I'll show you. Yes, I killed those sheep, Moran. Those beefs, too. And it was me that led the vigilantes that strung up that son of a sheepherder." His hand dropped to his .45, covered it. "And that ain't all." He glared at Lance. "There's another son of a sheepherder that's gonna get his, too."

"Shut up!" Moran barked. "Keep your hand away—"

But he could say no more. Dalton was yanking out his gun.

TWO SHOTS sounded like one; they shook the room. Dalton bucked as slugs tore into him, then his face squeezed with pain; he dropped his gun, still unfired, and fell to the floor. His hands clawed at the sawdust, then they were still.

Without emotion, Lance eyed the body on the floor. A wisp of smoke was

still trailing from the .45 in his hand. He had fired one of those slugs that had ripped into Dalton; the marshal's gun had blasted out the other.

But the danger wasn't over yet. Through the powdersmoke, Lance could see other eyes staring at the prone figure on the floor. The other Slash X riders were still on their feet. Hands lingered dangerously close to six-shooters at their hips.

But the marshal took control of the situation. "Gunbelts off, boys!" he ordered, coldly. "I want no more bloodshed here. We had enough already. And, anyway, you fellers might as well face it. You can't drive those sheep off. I talked it over—by wire—with Helena. Both sheep—and cattle—can graze in the Valley. The place is big; there's room for both. You kin figure out what grazes where. But there'll be peace. I got promise of help from Helena if I need it; but I don't reckon I will, 'cause there'll be peace. I guarantee that." Then he turned to Lance. "You still want to press charges? You still want to swear out a warrant over them dead sheep?"

Lance thought it over. "No," he said. "I reckon the idea was Dalton's. And—well—he won't have any ideas any more. The Carters will be willin' to keep the peace—if the cattlemen are. And, anyway, that threat of a warrant accomplished its purpose. It smoked Dalton out in the open."

Lance turned to go. But he thought of something else.

"But with me," he said, "it's still cattle. Now that my family's safe, I intend to go back into the cattle business again. Maybe now, my family will be able to hire a few hands. They won't need me. And me—well—I'll be needin' a couple of hands myself, 'cause I'm figurin' on startin' my own spread. It'll be small at first. But I hope it'll grow." He stared, hopefully, at the Slash X riders, centering his gaze, mostly, on old Abe Pflueger. "Any of you fellers lookin' fer a new job? You kin work fer me."

For a moment, there was an awkward silence. Then Pflueger stepped forward. "I'll work fer you," Pflueger said and held out his hand, "I'll be your first cowpoke."

Then Brennan spoke up. He was big and raw-boned. A capable puncher if there ever was one. "Count me in, too," he said.

"Thanks, fellers," Lance told them. "Two, I guess, is all I need fer a start."

And inside he was glowing. He no longer felt like an outcast. He was a cattleman again.

★

A Thrilling Feature Novel

BUSHWHACKER'S REVENGE

by J. J. Mathews

leads off the August issue of

WESTERN ACTION

It was just a daydream that Sheriff Wheeler could stop the hanging of this youngster. Uriah Forbes and his associates had already answered everything Wheeler could say, and the townspeople were forgetting what Forbes was, in their sudden lust for vengeance . . .

THE HANGING

by William P. Roberts

THE STORM, like the men of Sorrel Flats, had spent the day moulding its anger into solid, visible form, blotting out the fierce August sun with grim black clouds. The air became a thick, ticklish substance, heavy with the growing storm. At four o'clock a sharp wind cleared the air, and minutes later the first heavy drops of promised rain fell, beating the dusty street like scatter-shot.

Sitting before the rain-streaked window in the small building that housed his office, Sheriff Austin Wheeler absently watched the street before him melt into a narrow sea of mud. He liked the sight and sound of rain; on other days its monotonous drumming on the hand-split shake roof was a

source of solitary comfort. But now, listening to the dry rustle of his own thoughts. he did not hear it.

Across the rain-swept street, the doorway of the *Sorrel Belle* was an ominous black square against the front of the lively saloon, like the yawning mouth of a bottomless pit. All that afternoon, determined men had carried their purposeful anger as plainly as their weapons into that darkness. None had yet reappeared with a demand, but the ugly mutterings that boiled from the saloon had risen steadily as the number of men increased; with the shrill voice of Uriah Forbes, owner of the *Sorrel Belle,* erasing any doubts Wheeler had as to their intentions.

The feeling of men bent on a hanging was as real as the rain that poured from the dark sky...

Across the street a figure moved behind the string of wagons that obscured the entrance to the Sorrel Flats' Hotel. Mary Forbes appeared between two of the wagons, hesitated as her husband's angry voice sailed from the saloon, then retraced her steps, disappearing behind the wagons.

Watching her, Austin Wheeler momentarilty speculated on the reason for her furtive appearance; but when she had gone his attention quickly turned to the pleasant sound of the rain. Then the steady tapping of the prisoner's foot on the hewn floor brought the problem to mind with startling abruptness and he reluctantly put aside the sound of the rain and the happier thoughts it suggested.

Slowly stretching his heavy body erect, he stood up. A blue-veined hand lifted his sweat-blackened hat, held it aloft while long, thick-jointed fingers cut broad swathes through his white hair. He replaced the hat presently, wincing as a muscle caught in his back. It was the long vigil in the chair before the window, he knew. And the weather. Dampness and wet weather did that to him now.

Fifty-four years of age, Austin Wheeler was a man who neither feared nor faced the future. A dry, taciturn man, he stood now with the years cascading upon him, nearly smothered beneath their musty burden. Knowing the eventual outcome of this day, he found that instead of a steady hand, and a mind snapping with solutions to his problem, he wallowed in confusion, on the brink of surrender. This day erased any doubts he'd had while slipping comfortably into a life of looking backward.

He was an old man. On this day, at this moment; and with a calculated precision that surprised him, he hated it.

There were those days when he savored each priceless minute of his age, basking in the brilliant sunshine of thoughts and deeds of yesteryear. Reliving them leisurely, now that they were behind him, within easy reach, waiting to be plucked from the past and held before him. To be turned this way and that, fully and joyfully examined until he tired of them, then carefully replaced in the dust of time, until he again felt the need of their companionship.

It was sort of a plush-lined vacuum into which he retreated more often now; leaving the troubles of living behind. It was an exciting, rosy world he escaped to.

It was a life filled with memories, but this day would never be recalled. It would lay deep in the dust; buried beneath the faithful, often-recalled yesterdays, as completely forgotten as it is possible to forget. Filed with the painful memories of other days that need never be lived again.

THE STEADY tapping of the prisoner's boot jogged him again, but he did not turn from the window. He followed the course of Jed Mason's wagon as it wallowed its ponderous way down the muddy street. The wagon stopped before Mathew Wright's General Store and Mrs. Mason and her two young ones alighted, their clothing turned dark by the rain that had soaked them during their long ride into

town. The wagon moved again, slowly past Frank Penny's Livery Barn to its place at the end of the long string of wagons.

Mason climbed down, lifted his heavy rifle from the wagon seat and without a look in Wheeler's direction, disappeared into the *Sorrel Belle*.

The cumulation of feelings that had grown in Wheeler this day flared suddenly and anger rose in him. He counted the wagons, his lips moving slowly with the count: eighteen. And there were three horses tethered in the livery barn. Twenty-one. Every last man of them!

Wheeler knew the men had come in response to a call from Uriah Forbes. And their women had come to shop for the few things they did not grow or make with their own hands. In this year of 1868 it was a young land—a demanding land; as impatient as the people who settled it. Time was their most precious commodity and the hours spent on a trip to town, even for the purpose of hanging a man, could not afford to be wasted.

From across the street voices grew suddenly louder, angrier, resounding through Wheeler's small office. His eyes on the square of darkness that was the entrance of Forbes' saloon, Wheeler waited tensely, expectantly as a head appeared. Wig Hurley, one of the drifters that hung out in the *Sorrel Belle*, glanced at the dark sky, at the street heavy with mud, then withdrew. The sharp voices shrank to sullen muttering and after a minute Wheeler breathed again, grateful for the slight reprieve the weather had afforded.

Standing before the window, he watched as the rain continued to fall, steadily, endlessly, like a shower of broken crystal; its sharp edges carving rivulets that twisted through the red mud of the street.

After a time, he faced the prisoner.

HE SAT on the edge of a sagging bunk, his gaunt young body bent forward, shaggy head held between long-fingered hands. His foot tapped slowly, steadily on the hewn floor, like a metronome, ticking away the seconds remaining before he was dragged from the temporary security of h. cell and dealt the time-honored justice of the mob.

Wheeler watched the boy, his thoughts roaming the past, searching for a time in his own life when his fear had been as great. But because of the deliberate organization of his memories, he could find none.

As though the sheriff's gaze was a solid thing, touching him, the prisoner suddenly looked up. He did not move from the bunk. He did not change position or attempt to sit up straight. Quietly, hopelessly, he looked at Wheeler, his dark eyes opened wide by fear. "I hear 'em over there," he said. "They're fixin' to hang me, ain't they?"

The forced matter-of-factness in the boy's tone told Wheeler how hard he was fighting for control. He considered the question, unable to find an honest answer except to tell the boy that he probably would not live to see the sun set.

The prisoner watched him, suddenly looked away. "They're gonna hang me awright."

Most likely, Wheeler thought. They were not brutal, these men who wrung a living from the wild land they had settled, but they were foolish. They could ignore a cause that meant their very life because the problem was not clearly defined; but now that it was simply an eye for an eye, a killer's life for a life taken, Wheeler knew they would act.

Across the street, voices boomed angry words, faded, then boomed again. Wheeler stepped to the window. The street was empty. Beyond the last wagon the door of Wright's store stood open and he could see women grouped together, talking. Children's happy voices echoed from the store and the sound of small feet scampering.

Mary Forbes appeared suddenly at the rear of Jed Mason's wagon. A heavy shawl covering her head, she stood poised on the edge of the street

as though weighing a decision. Then, with a furtive glance in the direction of the saloon, she hurried across the street.

"I didn't do it," the prisoner said suddenly, fervently. Pressing his lean body against the bars of the cell, his long fingers gripped the slender shafts of dull metal. "Honest to God, I didn't kill nobody! I been in the saddle fer days, headin' straight fer the Willamette valley. I only stopped here so's I could sleep fer a night in a bed."

Before Wheeler could answer, his office door swung open and Mary Forbes stepped inside, quickly closing the door behind her. She was a thick, stubby woman, gaudy in bright red silk. Removing the shawl from yellow hair drawn to a tight bun at the back of her head, she faced Wheeler.

"They're going to hang him," she said. "They're going to hang him for something he didn't do."

Wheeler stiffened but said nothing as he watched raw emotion play on her face. Despair-filled eyes pleaded with him.

"They're talking about it now. He's got them to thinking it's the right thing to do. He's fooled them; every last man among them." She shuddered and drew a deep, halting breath. "Won't you stop him before he does any more harm?"

"Do you know who killed Bunky?" Wheeler asked evenly, feeling his stomach tighten.

"Wig did it. Wig Hurley." The words had a flat, final sound; like the passing of a sentence. "I know he did it."

Wheeler had known that. But unable to face the real trouble the knowledge suggested, he had been in the process of burying it deep in the chamber of forgotten memories. The easy—the obvious—solution of the problem he had seen in his mind's eye: the prisoner twisting slowly at the end of a rope. But now...

"Uriah told him to do it." Wheeler heard the words, hardly recognizing them as his own. "It was his idea—to force me."

Like a puppet, Mary Forbes' head bobbed. "He wants you out of the way because of what you know. If you let them hang him, you'll be a partner to his crime. If you don't, he thinks they will kill you."

AS QUICKLY as she had come, Mary Forbes left Wheeler's office and when the door was closed, shutting out all but the dull splattering of the dying rain, Wheeler paced a circle in the small room.

Everything was there now, all the pieces of the puzzle, in a jumble of thoughts that were confusion to Wheeler. Restlessly pacing, he wreathed the many thoughts that streamed through his head, trying to catalog them into some sort of pattern for action. But the pattern would not form.

His roaming thoughts reviewed the incidents that led to this day, but even now, having heard the accusing words from Forbes' own wife, he could hardly accept the merciless brutality of the little man. What kind of a man was it, he asked himself, that would kill a harmless old man and threaten the life of a boy to further his own selfish gains?

From the corner of his eye, he saw the prisoner, this gaunt, frightened boy guilty only of an untimely trip through Sorrel Flats. He had ridden into town the day before, swaying in the saddle like a doll of rags, stooped beneath the fatigue that was etched in every line of his face. Mildly curious, Wheeler had watched the boy care for his horse, then come to stand at the edge of the street, stretching the ache from his saddle-weary body.

Later that same evening, when the news of the killing reached Wheeler, this ragged boy was completely out of his thoughts. With Frank Penny, livery man and coffin maker, he rode to the flimsy shack near the creek bottom outside of town. There they found Bunky Hoag, bearing signs of having suffered a brutal and prolonged beating

before dying mercifully by the bullet that had torn away the back of his head.

"Gawd!" Frank Penny exclaimed, looking at what was left of Bunky.

From the dirty cot in the corner of the ruined shack, Wheeler took a grimy blanket, rolled the remains of Bunky into it and with Frank's help, swung the awkward bundle over Bunky's horse.

"Poor old Bunky," Frank mused, as they rode back to town. "Livin' in that shack like a animal. Savin' all his dust. Then gettin' hisself killed fer it."

Living alone, friendless, Bunky Hoag panned the creek that gurgled sedately past his cabin. Once or twice a year he had appeared in town to buy meager supplies with pinches of dull yellow gold dust. No one knew for certain, but it was commonly thought that he had quite a generous supply of dust cached away.

If he had, it had been stolen; they searched the cabin from top to bottom, finding nothing.

Back in town, Wheeler left the body with Frank to be fitted for a wooden suit and was returning to his office when he heard a commotion in the hotel.

A moment later the boy burst from the building, followed by Wig Hurley who held him at bay with an ugly hogleg cavalry revolver. The boy stood by quietly as Wheeler examined the gun and the skin pouch Wig handed him. One shot had been fired from the revolver. The skin pouch was nearly full of dull yellow dust.

The noise brought curious heads from the few buildings along the street and Uriah Forbes was one of them. The people listened while Wig told his story of finding the gun and the gold in the boy's room.

The boy protested, swearing he had never seen the gun or the pouch before. But Wheeler had no alternative; he led the boy across the street and locked him up. Wig had followed, carefully placing the skin pouch and revolver on the small desk in Wheeler's office.

Standing before the desk now, Wheeler hefted the revolver absently. He could turn the boy loose, he knew; send him flying from town before the mob could get to him. But what then? It would not improve his position; if possible, it would worsen it. And besides, if the men overtook the boy, they would hang him on the spot.

"Ain't you going to do something?" the prisoner asked in a strained voice.

Wheeler did not look at the boy. His back to the cell, he stood at the window again, seeing the wagons. The rain was nearly stopped and already the sun slanted strips of thin gold through the drifting clouds

He thought of the men who had driven those wagons into town and he knew they had weighed their decision carefully. They were acting on their best judgement. He could not blame them, not entirely, for he knew he was equally at fault. Asleep, he had let Uriah Forbes outmaneuver him; and now he found the very men whose place was beside him, fighting Forbes, on the other side of the fence.

Can't see the forest for the trees. The expression popped into his head and stuck there; a perfect description for the situation.

Wheeler had watched Uriah Forbes slowly but patiently knit his scheme for wealth and power, growing like a stubborn but subtle weed, until now his roots were imbeded in those who saw him as a friend.

He was a small, quiet man who possessed amazing foresight. In this young land he had seen the nucleus of a kingdom; his wealth, the land that he felt would some day become so important. Peering into the hazy future, he had seen a growing state with a governing body, with laws and men to enforce them. Then, with a quiet determination, he had enlisted the help of his friend Judge Malloy and had gone about the business of legally deeding to himself all the valuable land in the

area. Including the land owned by right of settlement, on which the men he had called together on this day had homesteaded.

Seeing this, Wheeler had gone to these men, explaining what he knew. They listened with their patient politeness, but they doubted him. Forbes was a pleasant person, a harmless little man who tended his saloon while his wife cooked and cared for their hotel.

They had turned their back on Wheeler, these men who had so recently fought and survived a terrible war. Wanting no part in the fight he proposed, they made it plain they would go far out of their way to avoid trouble.

Wheeler had dropped the fight then, knowing that he had exposed his position to Forbes, but somehow not caring. He was an old man, he told himself, his life behind him. He had warned them in good faith and his warning ignored, he felt nothing but contempt for these men who would not lift a hand for their own salvation.

So he buried his knowledge with other useless memories and his life again slipped into the timeless past. Knowingly, by his lack of resistance, he became Forbes' ally, but he did not fully realize the fear he had raised in this greedy little man...

Jerked from the security of the past by troubles he had chosen to ignore, Wheeler had found anger an emotion solid enough to cling to. Now, with his anger crumbling beneath the weight of responsibility, he turned his thoughts inward as he did so often now, seeking escape.

SHERIFF Austin Wheeler stood at the edge of the street, his great body relaxed, his long arms hanging carelessly at his sides. Across the narrow sea of mud, men faced him, their grim determination ebbing before his accusing gaze.

Uriah Forbes was there and Wig Hurley and Jed Mason. Behind the knot of men, in the wagons, sat their wives and children. The women were crying, holding their children close to them, burying tiny faces into heavy breasts so their eyes could not see. Mary Forbes stood alone at the rear of Jed Mason's wagon, white hands feverishly twisting her shawl into a knot. Tears streaming from her eyes soaked the front of her bright red dress.

Wheeler held up his hand, palm outward and the angry grumbling of the men died. His gaze rested for a moment on each face, moving on as the man's eyes fell.

"Fools!" Wheeler shouted. "You're a pack of fools! You stay at home, your heads buried in your own petty problems while Uriah Forbes robs you of the very land you are sweating your life away for. You did not heed me. But now, when Forbes tells you there is a man in town that needs hanging, you bust yourselves getting here to do the job."

A woman sobbed, a child's terror-filled cry rode the air, then silence.

"Go home," Wheeler said. "Get yourselves out of here; I will deal with Forbes and his murdering help."

The men moved uneasily in the street. Forbes said nothing. Wheeler watched the little man casually, then suddenly shifted his gaze to Wig Hurley. With a curse, the drifter went for his gun.

Effortlessly, Wheeler drew and fired. Wig pitched forward, his face buried in the mud of the street, his blood blending with its red color.

The men moved then, into their wagons and as the wagons turned in the street and drew abreast of Wheeler, each man reached down and solemnly shook his hand.

When the last wagon was gone, Uriah Forbes said: "You win, Austin Wheeler. You are the best man."

Frank Penny appeared, picked up the body of Wig Hurley. Wheeler said, "Bury him—"...

"...and I could be clean outa town

'fore they even knew I was gone," the prisoner said.

Absently, Wheeler turned from the window, and like a man awakening from a deep sleep, watched the prisoner.

"Didn't you hear me?" the prisoner asked, his voice rising. "*You* know I didn't do it, but *you* can't stop that bunch. I could be—"

A shout rode the clearing air, slammed through the small office. Again, Wheeler turned to the window and watched as Uriah Forbes led the men from the darkness of the *Sorrel Belle*.

Moving purposefully through the batwings, they stood on the edge of the street, hesitating as though the light and clean air had stripped them of their conviction.

Watching them fan out behind Forbes as they moved into the street, Wheeler's hand dropped to the holstered gun at his side, gnarled fingers finding the grip of the weapon worn glassy-smooth. It was a useless gesture and he knew it. Forbes did not matter, but the men with him did. They were good men being led by a man who had won their confidence. Knowing this weighted Wheeler more heavily with guilt. He might now have their confidence if he had not so readily given up, anxious, as always, to run from facts and the burden of living to the shelter of the dream-world he had built.

He had been maneuvered into this position, he thought suddenly, because he was a doting old man. Because he had lost the ability to think beyond his memories of see past yesterday. His fury was a helpless thing, raging and because he was not capable of turning it upon himself, he hated Uriah Forbes, at that moment, with all the powers of hell.

Thinking this, Wheeler watched Uriah Forbes advance on his office. When the door swung open and he faced the little man, knowing what he must do, he had not the slightest confidence in his ability to do it.

HE TOLD them what Mary Forbes had said. He told it as something of which he was certain, not bringing Mary into it. He watched his words wash over the impassive faces of the men before him and when the sound of his own voice was no longer in his ears, he listened to Wig Hurley, standing at the rear of the crowd.

"Hear him?" Wig shouted. "Hear what the old fool is sayin'? Didn't Forbes tell you what he'd say?"

Wheeler watched a smile lift the corners of Forbes' small mouth and he knew he had been outguessed again. His argument was crushed beneath the weight of excuses prepared in advance. Forbes had known what he would say; suddenly Wheeler imagined that the little man had even known the exact words he would use.

Voices rose then and men swept forward. Wheeler was carried along, seeing the boy taken from his cell, hearing the hopeless cry torn from his lips, then watching as, grim and quiet, he was led down the muddy street to the giant oak that grew beside the building that served as Sorrel Flats' church.

A rope slithered into the air, spun over a sweeping limb of the tree, whispered softly as it fell to earth. A long, rough knot was fashioned in the end of it and the loop dropped over the boy's head, then carefully fitted about his neck. A short rope was used to bind his hands securely behind him and when this was done, the slack was taken out of the long rope and the boy was manhandled onto his horse. He sat stiffly in the saddle, eyes ahead. The loose end of the rope was firmly anchored to the trunk of the tree and then the men stepped back, surveying their work.

From Wright's store the women had moved into the street and now they stood together before the church, watching this grim business. They were quiet, holding tightly to small hands happy to be held now, and

their mouths were pulled down into frowns of distaste.

Austin Wheeler stood to one side of the half-circle of men, his long fingers curled into tight fists, his wrinkled face shiny with sweat. The men began to stir uneasily and he knew that in a moment someone would start the noise that would send the skittish horse from beneath the boy. Only seconds were left in which to make up his mind.

Suddenly Wheeler dove into the knot of men, shoving and pushing until he stood before the horse on which the condemned boy sat. He grasped the bridle reins just below the bit, and held the nervous animal still. Hope flared suddenly in the boy's eyes; he sat straight in the saddle, his chin up, lips clamped so tightly muscles knotted along his jaw.

Angry voices rose and the men moved toward Wheeler threateningly. Turning his back on the boy, he faced the men squarely.

"Let go of that horse!" Wig Hurley yelled.

"I will," Wheeler said, "but not until I've spoke my piece. I'm not going to stop your hanging, but I've got something to say and I'm going to say it."

The women pressed closer, eager to hear. Wig Hurley shouted at the men, but they did not turn from Wheeler.

"You were getting ready to whoop it up," Wheeler said, "and get this hanging done. Then you could go on home, figuring you did a job that needed doing. You could tell your wives and your children how glad you were that you could help punish this murderer. But nobody could point his finger square at anybody else and say, 'There's the man that hung that boy'. Because nobody would know exactly who hung him, with everybody whooping and yelling."

"The old fool's crazy!" Wig Hurley yelled. "Let's get him outa there!"

Not a man moved. Wheeler watched them, letting his gaze linger on certain faces.

"You're pretty sure of what you're about, I guess," Wheeler continued, "or you wouldn't have got together without talking to me and done your deciding. Every man among you has got to be sure this boy killed poor old Bunky or you wouldn't be here muddy and wet and all set for a hanging. But don't you worry; we're going to hang this boy, and this is how we're going to do it."

STILL holding firmly to the bridle, Wheeler unbuckled his gunbelt, held the buckle, letting the gun and holster slide off. They lay at his feet, half buried in the mud. He held the belt at arm's length above his head so even the women could see it.

"I'm going to toss this belt up in the air," Wheeler said, "and the man it hits coming down will pick it up and and step up here and whip this horse out from under this boy."

A murmur rose from the men but not a single man spoke against Wheeler.

"We're going to do it this way," Wheeler said, "so I'll know who did the hanging and so all of you will know. Because one of these days not far off, you're all going to know the truth of this thing. And when that happens I want to be able to lay hands on the man that killed this boy."

Turning to the group of women, Wheeler said, "You ladies able to see all this? Fine—here she goes!"

Twisting slowly into the air, the belt hung motionless for an instant,

then plunged downward into the crowd. Men scurried from beneath it and with a dull, wet sound it landed in the mud. It had not touched a man.

"Pick it up," Wheeler said. "Pick it up somebody and step up here and get this animal started."

Escaping the falling belt, the knot of men had parted opening a lane between Wheeler and Wig Hurley. They faced each other now, over the belt. Wig took a step toward it, stopped, then quickly pulled his foot back. Every eye was on him.

"Go ahead, Wig," Forbes said, "pick it up."

"Damn you!" Wig Hurley snarled as he lunged at Uriah Forbes. The little man paled and backed away, but Wig never reached him. His foot landed on the half buried buckle and it slid beneath him, sending him sprawling face down into the mud.

"Relieve him of his guns," Wheeler said, and two men bent to the task before Wig could regain his feet. He struggled, covering himself with the red mud, but when at last he stood, his holsters were empty. Hands clenched in helpless fury, he glared at Uriah Forbes.

"Lock him up," Wheeler said, and when Wig had been marched away, he turned to Jed Mason. "Alright, Jed; undo that rope and let's get this boy down."

Jed did not hesitate. When the rope was undone, Wheeler helped and they lifted the boy from the saddle. They untied his hands and removed the noose from around his neck. He swayed, caught the saddlehorn for support. Leaning against his horse, he pressed his wet cheek against the worn smoothness of saddle leather.

Wheeler watched Uriah Forbes retreat toward the *Sorrel Belle,* knowing that he did not have to go after the little man. Not just then. Thinking this, he found his mind clear and yet it was like awakening from a dream. It was a wonderful feeling, standing there beneath the dripping bows of the tree, knowing a new strength and clearness of mind.

He turned to the boy, not trying to find an answer for this thing that had happened to him. It was enough to know that on this day, within the hour, the past and the present had walked hand in hand, showing him the way into the future.

☆

A Gripping Novelet

TRAILTOWN

by Lauran Paine

as well as

DIGGER JOHN'S BOTTLES ..... A. A. Baker 43
Believe it or not — Gold Run's safety lay with old whisky bottles.

GUNDOWN FOR A SADDLEBUM ..... W. J. Reynolds 52
Too late, Andy Nelson realized he'd make a bad bargain; but he'd stick with it.

DEATH TUNNEL ..... Gordon D. Shirreffs 61
The trouble was that Slim didn't know whether he'd killed Haycox or not.

Look for the August issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

The Hidden Room

By John Lackland

It was a tall-sounding story that Yellow Hair told, but Kansas Kallem figured it was worth investigating . . .

THE RAIN-WIND was stinging his face when Kansas Kallem sloped into Little Charley's place in the settlement. Not that Kallem minded the weather. Hombres who stopped at Little Charley's preferred bad weather, or a late hour, since it was well known all over the territory that his place was a haven for gents who didn't care to be seen. You could get drinks, tobacco, reasonably good chow, a room—with or without companion for your stay, as you preferred—and the wheel was on the level. A man hard on his luck could get along on the cuff for awhile; Little Charley kept his own brand of order, and he had a way of collecting what was due him sooner or later. So far as honor among thieves went, Little Charley was a straight one. You didn't have to worry about someone grabbing your roll if you got orey-eyed, or about any other unpleasantness so long as you stuck by the rules yourself.

And what Kallem, and numerous others, appreciated most was that Little Charley's was an outlet for news among the ragtag and bobtail fringes of the lawless. A gent could find out what was up, what was promising for a sortie, and which lawman was on the lookout for whom.

Kallem rode into the barn, found an empty stall for his black, and walked out; the horse would be cared for during his stay and would be waiting for him when he was ready to leave. How Little Charley managed to accommodate his guests, keep clear of the law, and make his own pile without incurring ill-will was something that was often wondered about in low tones; but one of the rules was that you didn't ask leading questions.

The bar was nearly deserted when Kallem went in and looked around cautiously to see if anyone he knew was there. Not that he expected to meet anyone; Kallem made a practice of not knowing many in his walk of life, but now and then a semi-familiar figure would be present, and he didn't mind splitting a bottle on occasion. General talk and news passed around freely enough without intimacy, and he'd get some lead he could use if he bided his time. He was somewhat curious, though, to learn if there'd be any talk about his last "job"—a bit of dry-gulching that had paid off rather nicely. Not that the five Farris brothers were known down in this neck of the woods—four Farrises it should be now; Kallem's business had been to cut one of them down.

Kallem smiled tightly at the thought of what nestled in his pocket—a nice little diamond he'd dug out of the stickpin that had belonged to the late Jake Farris. He saw Little Charley down at the end of the bar, polishing glasses. A couple of gents were hunched over a bottle at the bar's other end; now was a good time to do business with the proprietor.

He walked easily across the floor, up to where Little Charley was working in that deceptively-casual way of his, apparently not noticing anything around him. Kansas Kallem knew better; nothing that went on in his presence escaped Little Charley. He seemed to hear nothing except what was directed to his ears alone, but a number of gents who figured themselves real smart found themselves quoted back to their faces when the showdown came.

"Evening, friend," drawled Little Charley, without any sign of recognition as Kallem came up. "What'll it be?"

"Bottle, room, and some grub later," said Kallem, matching the other's offhand manner.

"Company?"

Kallem shook his head. He built himself a quirly and had the diamond out of his shirt pocket with the same gesture, holding it palm-down on the bar. "Owe you something for last time," he murmured. "And maybe this'll help my credit along for a spell." Kallem knew better than to hang on to the diamond; it would bring him nothing but trouble if he tried to hold on to it, or sell it outright.

LITTLE CHARLEY'S hand rested for an instant near Kallem's, then moved imperceptibly as Kansas raised his own and reached for the bottle the proprietor took from underneath the bar. "That ought to do it," he said, without apparent interest. Kallem smiled at the thought of some who had tried to pull such a stunt with worthless baubles. He'd seen one case; the gent had had a run of very bad luck soon after—ought to be out of the pen in another thirty-five years, with good behaviour. Little Charley turned back to his glass-polishing, and Kallem poured himself a shot, letting his eyes travel around the room slowly.

Over at one of the tables, a rangy, yellow-haired man was slumped in a chair. A trio sat around cards at the next table. Kallem noticed that one of the poker players seemed a little more interested in Yellow-Hair than in the game. He waited, watching until the solitary drinker's eyes closed and his head slumped forward on his chest. Then, a few minutes later, the poker player shoved his chair back and rose, as if to leave on a mission of temporary urgency; the player staggered a bit as he passed Yellow-Hair, lurched against him.

Kallem was away from the bar in a flash and had beaten the poker player to the door without seeming to hurry. His hand closed around the beady-eyed one's arm in a grip of steel. "In a hurry, friend?" he murmured.

The other rasped, "Out of my way, mister, if you don't mind."

"But I do," said Kallem, his voice still low. "Before you answer that call, maybe you'd better put that wallet back where you found it."

His voice was low, but it carried. And back at the table, the yellow-haired man seemed to waken momentarily. He shook his head, and his hand went inside his coat pocket. He rose to his feet, unsteadily, as Beady-Eyes tried to shove his way past Kallem.

"Take it easy and see another sunrise," said Kallem. His right hand rose from his hip and his gun was poking Beady-Eyes' middle. Kallem looked beyond the thief to see Little Charley catfooting across the floor.

"Something w r o n g, gentlemen?" purred the bartender-proprietor. His left hand was grasping a short, efficient-looking billy which he struck against his thigh as he walked.

"My—my wallet," started Yellow-Hair, who had now reached the trio by the door.

"Ah, yes," said Little Charley. "This pelican," he nodded at the gambler, "noticed it on the floor and was just about to bring it over to the bar for safe-keeping—*weren't you?*"

Sweat broke out on the poker player's face. "Y-yeah," he said; "that's what I was about to do."

Little Charley nodded and smiled. That is, a smile wrinkled his chubby features, but anyone who looked at his eyes wouldn't have known what his mouth was doing. "Honesty is the best policy," he said. He turned his head ever so slightly, and nodded; one of the two men at the bar straightened up and nudged his companion. "Well, since the owner is right here, you can turn it over to him."

Beady-Eyes stammered apologies and returned the wallet.

"Now," Little Charley went on, "I'm sorry you have to be leaving before it clears up, but when a man has to go..."

"Yeah...the...my business can't wait any longer," agreed the poker player. Kallem stood aside, and the

would-be pickpocket plunged outside. He noticed that the two by the bar were already making their way out through the back room. The wallet-snatcher was due to have some bad luck.

"Looked up your bill," Little Charley murmured to Kallem. "You're paid in advance."

YELLOW-HAIR emptied his cup of java with relish. "Wasn't so much the dinero," he said, "but I sure appreciate your saving that wallet. Had some keepsakes in it I wouldn't want to lose." He looked around the room which Kallem and he were sharing. "Guess it's safe to talk in here."

Kallem nodded. "You saw how fast Little Charley moved," he said. "That hombre wouldn't have gotten far, even if I hadn't stopped him. You'll get a straight deal here."

"Then why did you draw stakes, Kansas?"

Kallem studied the other for an instant, then decided that straightforwardness was the best response. "Doesn't hurt to let Charley know you're interested in seeing that his rules are kept. And," he shrugged, "who knows? Maybe I figured it wouldn't hurt to build up favors all around."

Yellow-Hair nodded. "Fair enough. Maybe we can work together for a spell." He paused. "Ever hear of *Hacienda Negra?*"

Kansas Kallem frowned. "The black house?" He repeated the phrase in Spanish, as if to jog his memory, then shook his head. "Nope; never did."

Yellow-Hair lowered his voice. "Not many have, Kallem. It was a legend, once, and lots of hombres have tried to find it. All kinds of loco stories about it, but when you pare 'em down to the bone, one thing stands out: there's loot there.

"In 1818 pirates under the flag of Argentina ravaged and looted Monterey. They carried off everything they could find, and burned the town to the ground. The inhabitants had managed to get out just in time; that is, all but one.

"This man was a servant in one of the richest houses in the town. When the looting started, he stayed behind and helped himself. And they say he managed to grab some from the pirates, too. How he managed to evade the pirates and conceal his stolen treasures was never known—but he did. He came up here, changed his name, and built himself a hacienda out in the wilds. Painted it black and called it *Hacienda Negra.* Kept most of the treasure in a hidden room there somewhere.

"Well, Fate caught up with him, at last; his throat was cut one night, and the hacienda robbed of everything that could be carted away. But not the treasure. The hacienda fell into decay. Then, finally a gent bought it and built it up again, redecorated it. But the foundations were never touched, and that hidden room still contains the treasure. Later owners knew nothing about the legend, and the gent who owned it last just died recently. It's unoccupied now and up for sale."

Yellow-Hair tapped his inside coat pocket. "I said that my wallet had keepsakes in it that were worth more than the dinero I'm carrying. That was an understatement, friend. What I have here is a sketch of the original *Hacienda Negra,* showing the hidden room, and a map of how to get there. There's more than enough for two there, Kallem."

Kansas Kallem stared at the other, wondering if he'd been chewing loco weed. "Sounds like a pretty tall tale," he said finally.

"That's why the opportunity is there for us," Yellow-Hair agreed. "I got this from an old prospector. The whole point is that few have known the true identity of the place." He took out his wallet, and extracted a small oilskin pouch; within this was a much-folded bit of parchment, which Yellow-Hair spread out. "This is what convinced me," he said.

Kallem whistled softly. It all didn't seem so much like a windy, after all. Who'd make up a map like that and carry it around?

"Just a couple of days' ride from

here," Yellow-Hair said. He went into specific details. "We can start right now."

Kallem shook his head. "If it's waited this long, I guess it won't hurt if we get a bit of rest first," he said. "I'm bone-tired."

The other reached for the bottle. "Yeah, I guess you're right at that; no point in being too eager, is there? Let's finish this off right proper, then get some shuteye."

THE SUN was low on the horizon as Kansas Kallem looked along his back-trail, then drew his horse to a stop. Got down, stretched, drew his bowie knife and plunged it into the earth. He lay down beside the knife, his ear to it, and listened for some minutes. At length, satisfied that there was no horseman following, he withdrew the knife, replaced it, mounted his black and continued.

Yellow-Hair would be coming this way after awhile, Kallem was sure—but he, Kansas Kallem, would have gotten there first. He'd seen to it that the other man had had two drinks to his one, had made sure that Yellow-Hair slept soundly. Kallem grinned; his head was clear while the other man snored; he'd gotten the map and copied it carefully, replacing it in Yellow-Hair's wallet. Hadn't taken anything else, either. No point in being greedy over trifles, by grab, when a fortune was for the taking.

He ought to be coming to another one of the landmarks indicated on the map pretty soon, Kallem figured. A pair of big rocks by the side of the road, with a bare tree growing between them—a tree that shot up something like a three-fingered hand. Maybe over the top of this rise in front of him...

When he had reached the summit of the little hill, Kallem grinned at the vista before him. Yep, there it was, etched in the glory of the setting sun. That was his marker; he had to cut across country now, ride up behind the rocks and pick his way almost due west, into the sun, until he came upon a trail. He'd planned it well, reaching this point a good time before dark. It would be hard to find that trail, soon—impossible for anyone more than a few minutes behind him.

The country was wild around here, getting more and more hilly and rocky. Underbrush began to thin out as he went along, giving way to shale. After a little while, he was out of the brush completely, easing his way along a flinty surface that stretched for a mile or so until it seemed to run dead-on into massive boulders. He figured this must be the place where he'd come upon the trail.

The sun was nearly down when he reached the boulders, looming all around and above him now. They ran in a haphazard line as far as his eyes could see in either direction, but over to the right a bit there seemed to be some sort of break in the line. He turned the black in that direction, and found what he was seeking when he got there. The "trail"—little more than a clear path running through the rocks—was just about wide enough for a mounted man to make his way.

Daylight faded as he went along, too sensible to try to push the black any faster than it wanted to go. There was an eerie quality about this stretch of territory and the misshapen bulks of stone all around him gave him a hemmed-in feeling. One man, up above there, could hold back an army in the dark.

Kansas Kallem whistled an old trail tune, as much to cheer himself as anything else. How long the passage would be, there wasn't any way of knowing; he couldn't compare too well by the distances on the map because of the different rates of speed at which he'd been traveling. He'd made good time up to now. Then, quite suddenly, he was through; the trail dipped and he was riding down a slope into a little valley.

And, even in the nearly-faded light, he could make out the shape of a ranch-house in the distance.

THIS HAD to be *Hacienda Negra;* Yellow-Hair had described the shape of the house—the map also contained a sketch of it, with an indication of where to look for the hidden room. Let's see, now, there was the barn, off to the right. He dismounted and led the black the rest of the way. Supposed to be deserted, and all that, but Kallem hadn't made out as a solitary lobo by trusting every detail anyone told him.

The barn door was ajar, but the entire feeling of the place was one of desertion. Kallem went in slowly, his eyes getting accustomed to the shadows. Yellow-Hair had been right, so far; this place was empty, but it didn't look as if it had been deserted too long. There ought to be lanterns hanging on the wall.

There were. Kallem made one out, hanging there. He took it off the nail, shook it, and found there was some oil left. He closed the door behind him softly, lit the lamp and gave the barn the once-over. All seemed to be in order; he led the black into a stall, threw a blanket over the animal, then, after checking and finding what he'd hope to find, took care of its needs.

Hacienda Negra, the black house. It wasn't black now; he could see where it had been trimmed with white, when he came up to it. There were shutters on the windows, nailed fast. Kallem frowned as he went from one window to another and found them all like this. Then he shrugged and made for the porch. Might as well try the front door.

It wasn't locked. Kallem got the feeling, suddenly, that this was some sort of trap. Or had he been followed, after all? He hadn't seen anything, yet there was the feeling of being watched. And it was downright strange that a deserted place should have everything so conveniently located for anyone who came along.

The moon was coming up now, and the old place had a strange look about it, and yet it seemed familiar, somehow. Kallem couldn't quite put his finger on it. Perhaps he'd been expecting something totally different; perhaps that was it. This could pass for just an ordinary overgrown ranch-house, temporarily abandoned. Well, of course, that's what it was, really—Yellow-Hair had pointed out that the last owner had made it just that.

An ordinary ranch-house with an extraordinary history. And a hidden room.

KALLEM trusted his instinct, which told him that no one was lurking on the other side of the door, and went in. He shut the door behind him and struck a match. He'd brought candles with him, but now he saw he wouldn't need them, most likely. The place was somewhat bare, but there were the minimum of furnishings necessary for his comfort. And the shuttered windows wouldn't betray his presence to anyone outside.

He lit a lamp and set it on the table, spread the map out on it. Let's see. The room he wanted was in the left wing, probably a bedroom once, because there was supposed to be fancy panelling all around the walls, and a fireplace. His footsteps had a ghostly sound as he walked along the floor, through the rooms that led to the one he wanted. No doubt about it, though. There wouldn't be any other room in the house that looked like this one, Kallem thought when he finally came to it.

It was at this point that the directions—clear as a bell up to now—got a little vague. He let his eyes roam around the room, empty now, at the panellings, decorated with fancy scrollwork, lion heads, and such. He looked at them closely in the lamplight; real smart carving, he thought—and those lion heads were pretty realistic.

One of them opened a door; you pressed the lion's right eye, and that did the trick.

Well, there was no sense in wasting time trying to figure out which head was the key; he'd just press them all. Left eyes and right eyes, too; that way he'd take no chance on missing the

important one. He decided to start to the left of the fireplace, and work all the way around the room.

There were more of them than he realized, and he was more weary than he thought. Kallem was about midway down the length of the room when he swore and snatched his thumb away from one of the lion's eyes. Must have been a splinter there.

But the wall gave before him when he pressed the next head. He forgot the sting in his thumb—must have driven a sliver of wood under the skin, he figured—and pushed harder. The panel swung inward, making a door just high enough for an ordinary man to enter at a slight stoop. He grabbed the lamp and held it to the opening. Saw a flight of stairs.

Kansas Kallem's caution woke up then. Some hombres would have just stepped right inside that opening, without wondering if maybe the door would close behind them and they couldn't get back out. He went back to the front room, got a chair, and propped it against the open panel; no trick machinery would pen him inside the walls now.

For a moment, Kallem wondered if he hadn't better take a breather now, get something to eat—maybe sleep a bit. He knew where the panel-opening mechanism was; it would take someone else just as long to find as it had taken him—even if they knew how to go about it. He shook his head. Nope, he'd go down to that hidden room, first; he'd make sure that this whole business wasn't just a whizzer—that there *was* a treasure.

But he felt still more weary as he started down the steps. They led around a curve, then into a small alcove. This must be the "hidden room", he figured. Not very big, but then, it didn't have to be. He saw a heavy-looking chest against the wall.

Kallem sighed happily, and started forward. He felt a little dizzy. He shook his head and set the lamp in a niche in the wall. The air here was sort of musty, he realized.

But...that didn't seem to account for the lethargy he felt. Dang it, his legs just wouldn't hold him up any more. He slid as much as sat down by the chest, feeling a sort of numbness.

IT WAS very still...but, didn't he hear footsteps? Yes, by grab, he did; there were footsteps in the room above, footsteps approaching the stairs down which he'd just come. Kansas Kallem reached for his gun—that is, his brain gave the directions to his muscles to reach, starting off that process which heretofore had resulted in his suxgun's clearing leather with considerable speed. But this time, his muscles didn't seem to understand.

He could barely move at all.

Now he saw a pair of boots coming into view; now a figure came through the entranceway into the little alcove. Kallem's mouth opened—or had it been open all along? He couldn't be sure—at the sight of the man. Why, dang it, this was the beady-eyed poker player who'd tried to rob Yellow-Hair. And, right behind him came—Yellow-Hair, and two other hombres Kallem had never seen before.

Or—had he? There was a resemblance among them.

Yellow-Hair grinned down at him, and said, "Well, Kansas, you did all right. Yup, you did just fine; you found the treasure for us."

Beady-Eyes pointed at Kallem. "Was I right?" he asked.

"You sure were, Lem," said Yellow-Hair. He squatted down and grasped Kallem's right hand, lifted it and looked at the thumb. "Poisoned needle," he said. "He's still alive, but I reckon it won't be long."

Yellow-Hair got up. "You see, Kallem," he went on, "we counted on your doing just what you did. We learned about this ranch and this room, but Lem here figured that maybe there was some kind of death-trap there. That sounded reasonable, seeing as how it was supposed to be a real fancy treasure. So we let you come first, fig-

[*Turn To Page* 98]

A JUG FOR JUSTICE

by Glen Monroe

They both claimed innocence of the shooting, but the enraged citizens of the town were determined to hang a killer. They had a rope ready and waiting . . . and if one of the pair — Ned Stiles and Pecos Darrow — didn't feel like confessing, then another rope could be found easily enough.

THE TWO men in the jail cell looked at each other furtively and listened to the coyote-like howl that burst from the crowd milling down on the main street. Ned Stiles rubbed at his throat nervously and then jerked his hand away when he realized what he was doing. Darrow took a punch at the Teton pole cot on which he sat and then kicked at the wall to blot out the noise. That was a hang-rope crowd out there around the corner, shouting in the night and talking angrily in the barrooms.

Stiles' slim body went rigid and he looked around with panic just behind the countenance of his boyish face. He raked a hand through his blond hair and caught the big Pecos Darrow eyeing him. "Don't stare at me!" Stiles snarled. "I didn't do it! I didn't! You must have, or—"

Pecos Darrow rose, sheering under his hawkish nose. "I know I didn't," he said heavily and unhurriedly. "And you're the only other hombre they picked up with a missing finger on his right hand. So-o—that means you did do it."

They stood staring, the younger man nervous and ready to crack, Darrow impassive and stolid as stone.

One of them was going to stretch rope come morning. One or both. Each knew that. It was this way.

A citizen of Bitterroot Gulch, one Eben Flagg, had been shot dead as he came out of the little barroom at the settlement a few miles down the line. Ned Stiles had been leading his pony down the road when Flagg came out. Flagg sighted him and flung an oath, going for a holster. It was just at sundown. Then Flagg had been shot dead.

The only witness, a friend of the late Flagg's, swore two things. The killer slung a gun left-handed. And he had a missing finger on the other hand.

Stiles had fogged it out of there but been picked up shortly afterward. He had admitted he had been an old enemy of Flagg's, though denying even having fired a single shot. But he was left-handed and the index finger of his right hand was shot off down near the knuckle.

Pecos Darrow had been brought into Bitterroot Gulch, too. An outlaw, he gave his handle as Benton and he wasn't recognized because he had never operated in those parts. He also was a left-handed trigger man. And the middle finger of his right hand was missing, lopped off in a knife brawl many years back. The witness couldn't say which of the pair it was.

But some action had to be taken to save the little jailhouse from being torn down, if nothing else. Eben Flagg had been a well-liked gent in the Gulch with a heap of friends who weren't forgetting the free drinks he had set up many a night. They demanded justice, and were prepared to mete it out themselves in short order. So Lever, the two-gun-wearing justice of the peace, had put both the accused in one cell with

orders to settle it between themselves.

"I promised that mob I'd let 'em have a prisoner by sunrise. They got the hang-rope waiting over the limb of the old cottonwood by the creek. So it's up to you two. They say they can git another rope if it's necessary."

SO THERE the two were with it already well past midnight. And they weren't strangers. Ned Stiles and Pecos Darrow had known each other before, some years ago. Young Stiles had ridden in Pecos' owlhoot outfit before he had pulled out to go straight, as he now claimed he had.

"I ain't hanging for no two-bit's sneak shooting," Pecos said heavily as he dropped back down on his bunk. "I know I didn't do it."

"You gotta take my word for it," Stiles pleaded. "I didn't do it. If you did, Pecos, you cain't let an innocent gent die and—"

"Why should I take your word?" Pecos asked scornfully. "Didn't you up and quit my outfit, skulking off like a danged coyote in the night?"

"I wanted to go straight," Stiles snapped back. "Not that a lead-slinging gun-wolf like you would know what that means, you—"

"Easy," Pecos warned. "You pulled out on us just before that fight at Gaines Flats when we needed every danged man we had! By Gawd—"

Ned Stiles steadied somewhat. "How could I know you was going to walk into that lawman's trap and have a fight? I've been straight for years and never was a killer. You never knew nothing else but killing. A man who knows you don't need two guesses to know who burned down this Flagg! ....I could tell 'em your name's Darrow and not Benton, and—"

Pecos sneered as he rose. "You tried to. But them bill of sales I had convinced 'em I was Benton." He measured the younger man with narrow eyes and then went over to the bars and bawled for the jailor. When the man came up he gave him a bill and told him to get a jug of redeye. Pecos Darrow thought he knew a way of finding out about this, and hanging the deadwood on the kid....

"Help yourself to as many drinks as you please," he told Stiles when the jug was delivered, wiping the mouth with his thumb after he had tossed off a snort himself.

Stiles eyed the jug, jaw muscles working. There was a fresh shout from down on the main street and a couple of shots from guns aimed at the sky. The crowd was getting more ornery every minute. Ned Stiles took a drink. They sat in silence a while. Each had another drink.

"Danged if I ever dreamed of stretching rope for some clumsy no-account gunning," Pecos said finally.

Stiles had rolled a quirly. He fired it and blew out blue-gray smoke explosively through his lean nose. "I was going straight. I was even thinking of high-tailing it when I saw Flagg go for his gun." He began to pace. They had another snort. Stiles' chin jerked up. "I only had a glimpse of that other gent. He had stepped from the corner of a building and threw down with his gun. I busted the breeze out of there plumb pronto."

"I never saw nothing....because I wasn't there," Pecos said gravely, hooking the jug up over his forearm again.

Ned Stiles walked over slowly and looked down at him in the wan rays from the lamp suspended out in the second-floor hall of the jail. "Look, Pecos. I don't owe you nothing. And I don't want to die for you or—with you."

"That stuff ain't gitting us outta this tight," Pecos said.

"You got yourself into it. You must uh done it, Pecos. Didn't you ever have a girl, Pecos? A real one you was locoed about and meant to marry? Well, I guess a sidewinder like you wouldn't—"

Pecos' bloodshot eyes flickered up angrily. "Maybe I did—once, a long time back."

"WELL, I got one now. Pretty as a spotted pony. She's waiting for me back in Elcott. We was going to marry up soon's I came home with this little herd I was buying."

"Elcott," Pecos mused. "Seems like I drifted through there. A fella can always meet up with a neat filly in some dancehall or—"

"She ain't no dancehall girl," Stiles came back uglily. "Not Ellen! She's right nice and—"

"Ellen?" said Pecos. The note in his voice was lost in another uproar from down the road. Again shots spit on the night.

"Yes, Ellen. Not a girl your kind would know but—"

"This ain't saving our necks," Pecos said, passing up the jug. "But what does she look like? Maybe I knew her pop or something. Yella hair, and—"

"Naw, Pecos. She's got red hair and some right pretty freckles on her nose. She stands about so high on me." He indicated his shoulder. "Maybe she'd stand a mite higher but she got hurt when she was thrown from a horse as a kid. Limps a little. But she would uh made me a wonderful wife and—"

"Limps, huh...." Pecos said it with a sneer but he didn't look at the kid, Stiles. His eyes bored into the wall. "Red hair, eh.... Me, now, I always like a gal what could sing sweet and soft."

"Ellen sings grand. When she gets going on some of those old hymns—or —or "The Blue haze of Texas"—well, it makes a man choke up inside. She—"

"Hymns," Pecos sneered. "What'd you say her last name was, Ned?"

"Drake. Ellen—"

Pecos Darrow was on his feet, his menacing body throwing a mammoth shadow on the cell wall. "Ellen Drake and she lives at Elcott, huh. ...I recollect—I know her pop. He—"

Stiles sneered in turn. "He's a law-respecting gent, Pecos. Paul Drake is his handle. He's a beef buyer for some big meat company. Always a-travelling a heap. I ain't even met him yet. He writes letters sometimes, but—"

PECOS DARROW chuckled, teeth bared. "Thanks, you fool. Ellen Drake of Elcott. Hmmmm.... All right. I got you now. I got a trail pard who'll be drifting through here some time right early. He can swear I weren't nowhere near this settlement—if he gits here in time. So I didn't do it. Now—"

"You must have— I didn't!" Stiles said hoarsely.

"Shut down and listen to me. Ellen Drake of Elcott. All right. As it now stands, we both die. My friend mightn't git here in time. Now a dying man's always allowed to write a letter first. So I think I'll write a little note to Miss Ellen Drake a-telling her how you was an outlaw who rode with me. How I'm an old friend of her pop's and aiming to save her trouble."

"Y-you can't...." Stiles had a fist drawn back.

"I do that, or you...."

"I what?" Stiles croaked.

"Confess to this shooting and let me git out for sure if my pard don't show up. I know I'm innocent!"

"And I hang, eh?"

"Or I write that letter telling Ellen what you are—an ex-outlaw.... She ain't the kind of a girl who'd understand that, Ned." Pecos snorted cynically.

Ned Stiles weaved as he strode to the window and clenched the bars desperately. Long minutes passed. He came back and lifted the jug for a double snort. It was chilly with the wind that came off the sage flats. But the dew of perspiration speckled his forehead.

"She'd never look at me again," tore from him wretchedly once. "And it'd hurt her—"

He took another drink at Pecos' suggestion, scarcely aware of the man's presence. Then he had another, pacing the cell between times. He finally whirled, veins knotted on his forehead.

"All right. I'll confess! ...Damn your hide. ...Anything so long's you don't write her!"

Pecos' eyes fired up with a strange glitter of pride. Then he lowered the lids to mask them and pushed up the jug again. "All right, Ned. You can't blame me for wanting to live—knowing I'm innocent. But they's no hurry for a while. Might as well enjoy your last few hours and have a last drink or two..."

IT WAS A couple of hours before dawn when Pecos Darrow tiptoed to the cell door and whistled through the bars till the rheumatic jailor dragged himself upstairs. Behind Pecos, stretched in his bunk, lay Ned Stiles. The younger man breathed heavily. Pecos had never yet met the man who could match drinks with him out of a jug.

Pecos was sweating despite the chill now. He told the jailor he wanted to see Lever, the justice of peace. That he had something plumb important to tell him. When the lawman came, reeking with redeye, Pecos made his bargain. He wanted to be allowed to write one letter to a relative. It had to be mailed from Liscombe down the trail so they wouldn't connect him with the hanging here in the Gulch. Then he would sign a confession to the killing of Eben Flagg.

"I'm Pecos Darrow the outlaw, by the way," Pecos added. "The kid in here is plumb innocent..."

IT WAS THE roaring of the crowd at the hanging that wakened Ned Stiles the next morning. He sat up, wondering if he were already in Heaven or Hell. The sunlight stung his eyeballs and his mouth felt as if he had eaten a mess of cacti and extra-dry alkali. He yelled for Lever.

When the justice told him he was a free man, tears welled to his eyes and he swayed dizzily. Downstairs before he rode out, they showed him the confession Pecos Darrow had signed. Stiles stared at the signature with the big boldly-scrawled capital "P" and "D" with the flourish at the tail of each initial and wished he could grip the dead man's hand.

It was over two weeks later when he rode back into Elcott with the little herd he had purchased. Ellen, red hair gleaming, was standing on the porch of the little house where she boarded. He ran up the steps and hugged her tight.

Inside the parlor, close to each other on the horse-hair sofa, she took out a letter she had received two days ago from her father. In it he said he mightn't be back for quite a spell because he had to drop down into Mexico on business. And there was a sum of better than five thousand in her name over in the bank at Puma City.

There was something about the letter in the dim light as he read it that seemed familiar to Ned Stiles. He peered at the writing. Then he found his hands shaking. His eyes dropped to the signature at the bottom of the second page. "Paul Drake," it said.

Ned half choked and was glad when Ellen was called away for a moment. He knew that "P" and "D" well. As well as a man will know anything that has saved his life. The "P" and "D" were boldly scrawled with the flourish at the tail of each initial—the same as they had been in the name of Pecos Darrow, in the confession at the Gulch jail...

★

TEXAS HERDS BRING DEATH

(continued from page 27)

pale, scared face. "It was awful." She caught the warning glare in Britt's face and swallowed hastily. "The way you ruined those new clothes, I mean. Why, that butternut shirt is nothing but shreds and, well, I don't know whether I'll ever be able to get all that mud out of those trousers or not." It wouldn't hold together. Sally's bravery crumpled like wet paper and she went down on her knees beside the bed, burying her face in the quilts over Caleb's bruised and aching body.

Britt cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Say, Caleb, uh, do me a favor, will ya?"

"Sure, Jack, what?"

"Damnit, the next time ya gotta fight with someone, make it a little guy, will ya? Why, that ox outweighed ya close to seventy pounds." There was a brisk thump on the back door and Britt started in his tracks, dropped his hand to his holster and swung it open with a savage frown.

Bull Bear was standing there with a brand new fringed hunting shirt. He held it out ruefully and looked at Britt's hand on his holstered gun. "No good. Bull Bear always get almost shot when he come in here. No good." He smiled at Caleb and tossed the handsome shirt on the bed. "Running Horse send this shirt. He said you best fighter he ever seen. Some fight, by damn!" He turned abruptly and walked away.

Jack closed the door with a sigh as Sally raised her tear-stained face and looked at the Indian shirt. "No, Caleb. You've worn the last one of those things you're ever going to wear. From now on you dress like Jack an' the rest of the respectable cattle men. The frontier is changing. You have to change with it." She tossed the fringed shirt into a corner and looked appealingly at Britt.

He cleared his throat again. "Uh, Caleb, uh. Well, Sally an' I've bought you a little herd o' cows. Uh, like I told ya once before. Scoutin's all over, pardner. It's goin' to be cows from now on, not buffalo. Uh, you can buy a chunk of land an' be a cowman. Uh, how about it?"

Caleb looked sadly at the hunting shirt, over at Sally's wide, pleading and tear-stained eyes. He nodded to Britt. "I reckon you're right, Jack. From now on I'm a cowman."

★

KNOW YOUR INDIANS

(continued from page 6)

Mexico. A great many of those in central Mexico are employed as miners, a profession for which they appear to have a particular aptitude. Others are teamsters, truck and bus drivers, police and rural guards, farmers—and, in fact, they work at almost every profession. Those who live near the coast are often fishermen, seamen, pearl divers, etc. Regardless of the trade or profession they follow, they are considered "tops" and are noted for their honesty, their industry, their pleasing and polite manners and unfailing good nature; yet of all the tribes of North America they were the only Indians who—although surrounded by white civilization for centuries—were never conquered or subdued until 1906-07.

Physically, they are a rather short and stocky race and with unusually dark skins; many have full bushy beards, although of pure Yaqui or Cahita blood.

East of the tribes of the Mexican border are the Sandias, a small peaceful tribe whose one claim to fame is the fact that watermelons were named for them. The Spaniards first saw these melons being grown by the Sandia In-

dians and called them "Fruta de Sandia"—a term that was shortened to "Sandia", which is the Spanish name for watermelon.

Of all our Indians, probably the most frequently visited and best known to tourists are the Navajos and Pueblos. Both are colorful, picturesque friendly and pleasant—and are keenly aware of the importance of the tourist trade, and the pecuniary benefits derived from it; both the Navajos and the Pueblos produce many articles of handicraft that have a ready sale. The Navajo textiles and blankets have no equals and are always in demand. Their silver and turquoise work is world-famous, while the Pueblo Indian pottery is noted for its beauty of form and artistic perfection of designs and color; their silver work, basketry, and textiles are all of high quality.

WHEN visiting the Navajos it seems almost incredible that these good-natured, friendly, hospitable people should have once been among the most hostile and savage tribes and a thorn in Uncle Sam's side. They gave the Government and Army officers many a headache until 1863.

One of the largest of our Indian tribes, the Navajos were a pastoral and agricultural race, despite their warlike character, and occupied parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and adjacent territory. It was the extent of land that they controlled that gave them their present name, for "Navajo" is not of Spanish derivation, as is often assumed, but is from *"Navahu"* meaning a large area of cultivated land. Until after the Mexican War the Navajos were constantly at war with neighboring tribes, and the whites; but in 1846 a treaty was signed, only to be broken by the whites as usual. Hostilities were resumed until 1849, when a second treaty was made—which, soon afterwards, was violated by the whitemen.

Savage raids on the various Pueblos were made, and the Navajos' attack on Taos—in which a number of whites were killed—was the culmination that spelled disaster for the Navajos, the Government decreeing that the tribe should be transported to Fort Sumner on the Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. But to issue a decree and to carry it out proved two very different matters, when it came to the question of the Navajos. Always a jump ahead of our troopers, they were here today and gone tomorrow as the saying goes.

Finally, an expeditionary force of about 300 troops and civilian volunteers, with a number of Ute warriors and scouts—all under the direction of Kit Carson, the famous scout—drove the Indians to Canyon de Chelly, their original home and stronghold. In the canyon, with its almost precipitous walls, and with narrow openings at either end, the Indians defied the whites. But when the troops had slaughtered all of the Navajo sheep, goats, cattle, and horses that could be found, the Indians were faced with starvation. Although outnumbering the whites by many thousands, (they undoubtedly could have wiped out their enemies) the Navajo chiefs realized that to do so would mean terrific losses to themselves, and a conference under a flag of truce was arranged. When Carson gave his personal promise that if the Indians surrendered they would be restored to their homes in three years, they capitulated and were sent to Fort Sumner. It was a long, hard, terrible trip. Many of the Indians died of exhaustion and privation, and still more died of malnutrition and other causes at the fort. But Carson kept his promise; after three years they were restored to their original homes and were given thirty thousand sheep, two thousand goats, and many horses and cattle. Although at that time they numbered about 9,000, they increased rapidly and today they are the largest of all our tribes—with a population of about 45,000, or almost one tenth of the total Indian population of the United States.

Racially they are something of an ethnological puzzle, for they are a com-

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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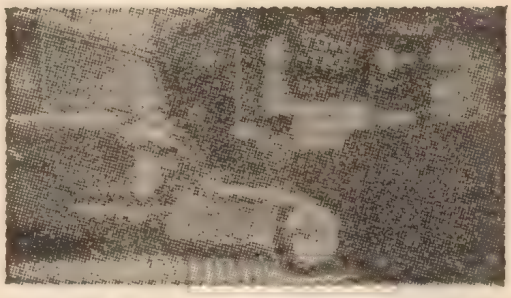

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posite tribe in which several stocks are blended; their language is composed of a number of different linguistic stocks. Physically they are about as composite as in race and dialect, and it would be impossible to describe the typical Navajo. Some are tall, finely-proportioned and with hawk-like features; others are short, stocky and with broad rather flat faces; but all are alike in their friendly, good-natured character—while many of the women are very handsome, especially when young. They vary considerably in color, some being much darker-skinned than others; but on the whole they are a light coppery-brown and many of the men have moustaches and even chin-beards.

In numberous ways they differ from all other tribes in the United States, but closely resemble the Mapuches or Auracanians of southern Chile. Both tribes are preeminently pastoral, with farms, flocks of sheep, goats and cattle. The Rucas or horses of the Mapuches and the Hogans of the Navajos are very much alike, and both tribes use the same types of utensils, weapons, etc. Both are famous for their silver and turquoise work and their splendid blankets and textiles. Both the Navajo and Mapuche men wear a turban-like cloth about the head, while the costumes of the women are almost identical. In physical appearance, the two are practically indistinguishable, and there is a striking similarity in their religions and ceremonials. Although neither tribe ever uses boats or canoes, yet both the Navajos and the Mapuches bury their dead in boat-like coffins.

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[*Turn To Page* 88]

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VERY DIFFERENT from all the other Indians of the far Southwest are the Pueblos, with their fortress-like towns of adobe buildings. Many persons seem to think that "Pueblo" is the name of a tribe of which all Pueblo Indians are members. This, however, is not the case; the Spanish word "pueblo" means "a village", and is applied to all the Indians dwelling in adobe villages. Moreover, instead of all the Pueblo Indians being of one tribe, there are a number of tribes of various stocks and speaking different languages —although a great many speak English and nearly all speak Spanish. The Zunis and Hopis, who perhaps are the best known to tourists are of two distinct tribes or races. The Zunis are of Zunean stock, whereas the Hopis—with their pueblos of Walpi, Sichomovi, Mishongnovi and others—are Shoshonean, and belong to the same group as the Kiowas, Comanches and other nomadic tribes. Very often the Hopis are erroneously called "Moquis" but the two words have very different meanings. Hopi is a corruption of "*Hopitu*" meaning "Peace People" whereas "Moqui", in the Hopi language, means "Dead". The Hopis are far from being dead ones, but are keenly alive to the value of the tourist trade. Still other pueblos, such as San Felipe, Santa Ana, Acoma, Cochiti Laguna, and Santo Domingo are inhabited by Indians of Keresan stock while the people of Taos, Pucuris, Isleta, and others are of Tanoan stock.

The ancestors of the Pueblo Indians built their homes and villages of stone slabs in cavernous depressions in the mountain-sides, where they were accessible only by means of ladders and hence were safe from enemy raids. Later they abandoned their cliff dwellings, and built their houses of sandstone blocks on the summits of steep-sided mesas. After the arrival of the Spaniards, they learned the use of adobe and abandoned stone in favor of adobe bricks. From two to six stories in

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height, the buildings are in tiers similar to the "zoned" skyscrapers of our cities. There are no openings at ground-level, access to the dwellings were made possible by ladders, which could be drawn up when the occupants had entered. The villages were thus transformed into fortress-like affairs from which the occupants could pour showers of arrows at their foes who were powerless to scale the walls. After the arrival of the whites, and when danger of raids by their nomadic enemies was at an end, the Pueblos built their villages on level ground—as well as on mesas—and provided many of them with doorways and windows, like ordinary dwellings.

Probably no other North American Indians are more intensely religious than the pueblo tribes. Their secret rites, ceremonials and sacred dances are very numerous and complex. Many of these are held in the secrecy of the interiors of the villages while others are carried out in the open, in the presence of strangers. Formerly, white visitors and other outsiders were permitted to be present at the famous snake dance of the Hopis, but today no strangers are allowed. How these Indians can handle living rattlesnakes, and be bitten by the reptiles without ill effects, is a mystery; but as the participants go through secret rites and make "medicine" for long periods in advance of the dance, it is probable that they use some means of building up an immunity to the snakes' venom. Also, at the close of the dance, they use powerful emetics and thoroughly clean themselves out. Whether this is to eliminate the poison, or is merely a religious rite is a question; sacred dances among many other races are followed by a similar "purification" on the part of the dancers.

Each of the various pueblo tribes has its own costumes, for both men and women; and while their everyday garments are quite simple and rather plain, many of their costumes worn at dances, ceremonials, etc., are gorgeous garments of buckskin, or textiles often

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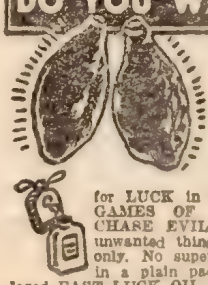

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elaborately beaded and with beaded moccasins. The masks worn are often immense, complicated affairs, as are their headdresses. Unfortunately, in order to fulfill the white man's idea of what a real Indian should look like, the pueblos frequently wear the plains-type feather bonnet, which is most incongruous and out-of-place here.

Primarily agricultural Indians, the pueblo tribes cultivate large areas of maize, peppers, melons, beans and other crops. Their pottery is famous, each pueblo having its distinctive forms and colorations. They are also skilled weavers, producing high grade blankets and other textiles almost, if not quite, as fine as those of the Navajos, and they are skilled basket makers and silver smiths.

NO ACCOUNT of the Indians of our Southwest would be complete without brief biographical sketches of the more famous of their leaders among whom are the following:

ADOETTE (Big Tree): A Kiowa chief born in 1845. At one time a bitter enemy of the whites, he took a prominent part in warfare. In May 1871 he led a war party in company with Santanta (White Bear) and Satank (Sitting Bear) in an attack on a wagon-train, killing seven men and making off with forty-one mules. The three chiefs were arrested and taken to Fort Sill to await trial in Texas. Sitting Bear resisted and was killed by a guard, while the other two chiefs were locked in the Texas prison until 1874 when, upon promising to prevent further hostilities on the part of their tribe, they were released. Later on White Bear was again arrested merely on suspicion that he was planning trouble. He then committed suicide in prison. This resulted in another outbreak of the Kiowas, and despite the fact that Adoette had taken no part in this trouble he was arrested and confined at Fort Sill. He became a Christian and a sincere friend of the whites and devoted the remainder of his life to cul-

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tivating the allotment of land given to him by the Government.

KICKING BIRD. (Tene-Angpota): A Kiowa chief, the grandson of a captive Crow Indian who had been adopted into the tribe. A highly intelligent man, he realized the hopelessness of resisting the white men and used his influence to maintain peace. He took no part in the outbreak of 1868 in Texas; and when Lone Wolf joined the hostiles, Kicking Bird induced more than half of the hostile warriors to return with him to Fort Sill. He asked for and was granted assistance in building the first school among the Kiowas in 1873. He was a strong advocate of education and temperance and was a devout Christian. He died from poisoning in 1875.

LONE WOLF (Gui-Pa-Go): A Kiowa chief who, in 1867, signed a treaty by which the Kiowas first agreed to be placed on a reservation. In 1872 he led a delegation to Washington, but the murder of his son by a Texan so embittered him that he led his tribe in an outbreak in 1874. On his surrender in the spring of 1875 he and a number of other chiefs were confined in Fort Marion, Florida for three years. He died soon after his release in 1879. and was succeeded by his adopted son of the same name.

MANUELITO: A Navajo chief, and leader of his tribe in the campaign of 1863. In 1872 the Government appointed him chief of the Indian police.

SANTANTA. (White Bear): A Kiowa chief famed for his oratorical ability and keen sense of humor. Although almost constantly hostile, yet he was popular and well liked by the Army officers. With Lone Wolf they signed the Medicine Lodge treaty of 1867. His band delayed going to the reservation, and were attacked by Custer who took Santanta and Lone Wolf prisoners, accusing them of having had a part in Texas hostilities prior to signing the treaty. Santanta committed suicide by jumping from the window

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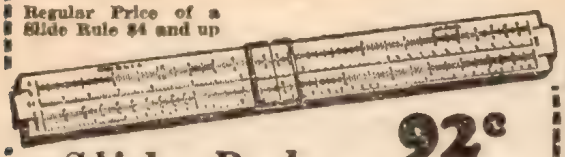

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of the prison hospital. A man of splendid physique and proud and commanding bearing, he was described as "princely" even when in convict clothes. The Kiowas regarded him as one of their greatest men.

CHOCISE: Chiricahua Apache chief. Son of Nache and friendly toward the Americans until 1861, when he was arrested under a flag of truce and was tortured to force him to confess to the suspected abduction of a white child (who was later found.) Although he escaped by cutting through the tent, he was wounded in the body by three bullets. He at once started hostilities and for ten years played havoc with the white settlers and immigrants. He surrendered in 1871, but when ordered to a new reservation in New Mexico he and two hundred of his warriors fled and joined about five hundred other Chiricahuas and resumed hostilities. In 1872 they voluntarily surrendered and settled down, to become ardent farmers and railway workers.

Cochise, who—next to Geronimo—was the most famed and feared of Apache chiefs, died peacefully on his farm in 1874 and was succeeded by his son Tazi. Inherently honorable, and inclined toward friendship with the whites, Cochise never would have caused trouble if the whites had not mistreated him and his comrades, and had kept faith with the Chiricahuas. Although a savage, desperate, pitiless fighter, Cochise never forgot a kindness nor an injury. On more than one occasion he ordered his braves to guard the homes and properties of settlers who had befriended him.

GERONIMO (Goy-Ath-Lay): "One Who Yawns" (blase): Nicknamed Jerome, (Geronimo) by the Mexicans. A famous Chiricahua Apache medicine-man and chief. His fame was largely acquired by opposing the authorities and by sensational publicity.

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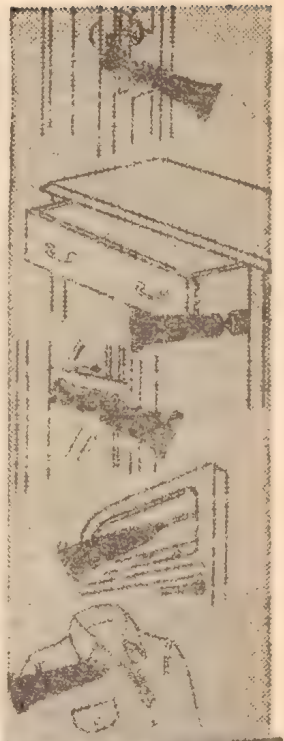

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San Carlos, Geronimo and his band fled to Mexico. Upon their return to the United States, they were arrested and taken to San Carlos by force. Here Geronimo took to farming and ranching, was very peacefully inclined, and was doing well until the Government refused to keep its promise to irrigate the Indians' farms. This led to some discontent; but there was no trouble until the making of the Indian liquor. *Tiswin*, was forbidden, and following this, Geronimo's cattle were stolen and his crops destroyed.

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No famous Indian of the past has so little real claim to fame as Geronimo, for he seldom engaged in a stand-up fight; he left the leadership and strategy of his raids to another chief, and was always one jump ahead of the Army until he was ready to surrender and save his skin. Yet he caused the Government more headaches than many another leader whose name has been forgotten.

MANGAS COLORADAS (Red Sleeves): A Mimbreno Apache chief. He pledged friendship when General Miles occupied Fort Kearney in New

[*Turn Page*]

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Mexico in 1846, and remained a friend of the whites until the massacre of a large portion of his tribe by the white miners who invited the Indians to a feast and then murdered them for the sake of the Mexican bounty on the Indians' scalps. In addition, Mangas himself was brutally beaten by miners of the Pinos Altos mines. Furious at the treatment of his people and himself, he gathered a band of Mimbrenos and for years was a scourge to the white settlers. Forming an alliance with Cochise to repel California volunteeers, he was wounded at the battle of Apache Pass. His men took him across the border into Mexico, where he was left in charge of a surgeon—who was warned that if the chief died, the town and its people would be wiped out. Fortunately he recovered, but soon afterwards was captured by the Californians who prodded him with a red-hot bayonet, and when he tried to evade the torture, shot him down on the pretext he was trying to escape.

NACHE: A Chiricahua chief, the second son of Cochise, who became a chief upon the death of his elder brother, Tazi. His mother was a daughter of Mangas Coloradas. He was actually the leader of Geronimo's band, although the latter was credited with having led the many raids that decimated the settlements of New Mexico, Arizona, and northern Mexico. He was captured by General Miles and imprisoned in Fort Marion, Florida; later he was sent to Alabama, finally being transferred to the prison at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he remained until his death. He was regarded by the officials as a very honest and trustworthy man who did not require watching, and was placed in charge of the other prisoners.

QUANAH PARKER: The son of the Kwahadi-Apache chief, Nokoni, and a white woman captive, adopted by the tribe. He was noted as a brave and savage fighter and, like many another half-breed, he was famous for

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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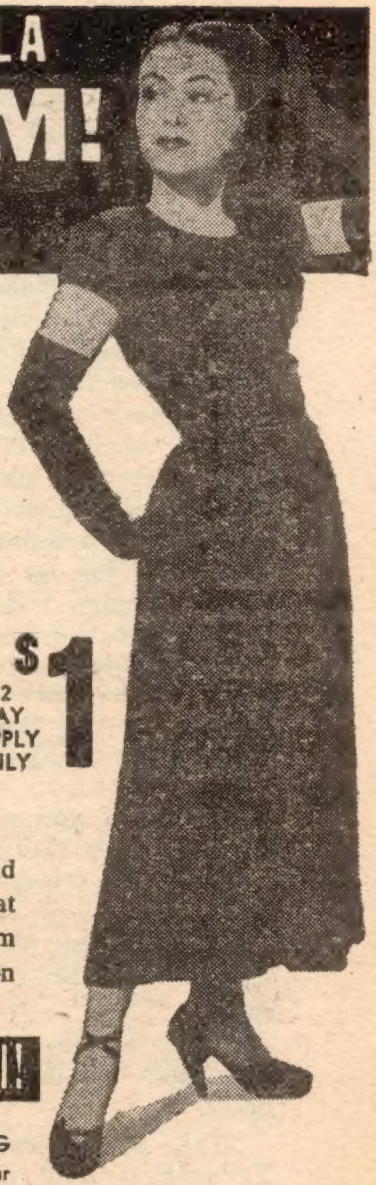

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his hatred of the whites. In 1874 he organized a condeferation of the Kiowas, the southern Cheyennes and other Indians and attacked Fort Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle, but was repulsed with heavy loss. The following year, most of his allies surrendered.

Parker, however, kept his own band on the Staked Plains for two years more before surrendering.

He at once adapted himself to the changed conditions, and became the most important factor in leading his tribe to adopt civilization. He advocated education, encouraged building schools and comfortable houses, and developed systemitized agriculture while frowning on dissipation of all kinds, although still maintaining the Indians' tribal ceremonies and dances. All his children were well-educated, and his daughters married prominent and wealthy men. He was the most prominent and influential member of the Apache tribes in all their dealings with the Government, and made frequent visits to Washington and other eastern cities. He was a very successful farmer and rancher and lived in a large house near Fort Sill where he was highly respected by his white neighbors. The town of Quanah was named after him.

VIGEL (AUGUSTIN): A Jicarillo Apache chief who was noted for his hostility toward the Mescaleros, with whom he was constantly at war, and for his hatred of the whites. He caused comparatively little trouble, however, declaring that he could endure the white men as long as they continued to kill the Mescaleros.

★

The Hidden Room

(continued from page 76)

uring that if you got killed opening the way, it wouldn't hurt us none."

One of the others chuckled. "Don't think he's got the whole point yet."

"Can you hear me, Kallem?" asked Yellow-Hair. "Blink your eyes, if you can."

Kansas Kallem found that that was just about the only motion he could make.

"Take a good look at us, Kallem," Yellow-Hiar went on. "Maybe we'll look sort of familiar, all together like this. Of course, it could be you never got a good look at Jake, but I'm figuring that you did."

Jake! Suddenly, Kallem knew. Jake Farris, the man he'd drygulched. And these others, then, were the remaining four Farris brothers. Yellow-Hair looked a little different, and Lem... oh hell, Kallem thought, he should have recognized Lem.

"We were going to string you up when we caught you," Yellow-Hair went on, "but Lem here had a better idea." He turned to the others. "Let's not be cruel to Kallem. He's come to this pass because of treasure; let's open the chest and let him see the loot."

Lem and the others chuckled, and they bent to the job, and threw the lid open. The exclamations that broke from their lips told Kallem that the legends hadn't lied.

"Here," said Yellow-Hair, "let's move him so he can see, too." Kallem felt himself lifted, then a vista of gold and jewels met his eyes.

"We aren't greedy, Kallem," said Yellow-Hair; "we can wait until morning. So we'll just let you feast your eyes for the rest of your life."

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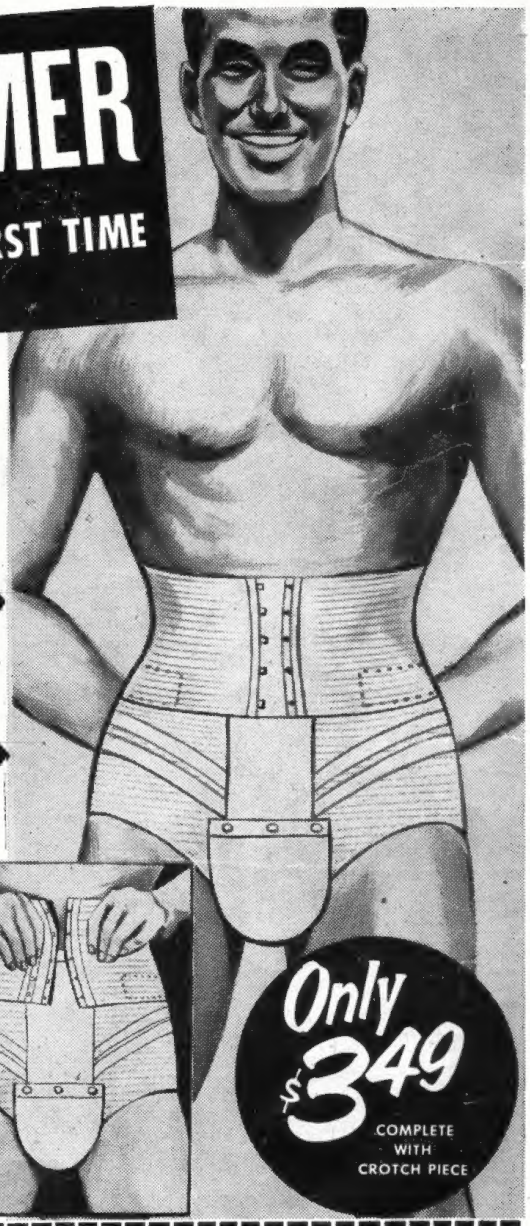

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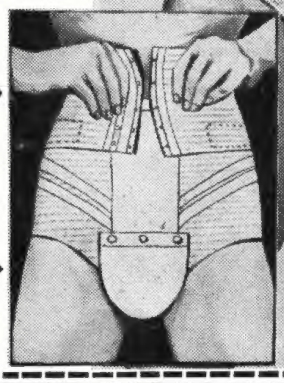

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